

How to Market Things That Are Harmful: An Exploration of Destructive Consumption and  
Consumer Behavior

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**Abstract**

This study focuses on why consumers choose to engage in destructive and harmful consumption and how it can possibly aid businesses that engage in the selling of products that align with this category of goods, ideas, and services. Desired outcomes from this information are for these organizations to have more precise target market strategies, be able to practice advertising more efficiently, and to understand what types of products and industries have a higher competitive advantage. In order to explore and provide this information, the four P's of marketing, the marketing environment, and cognitive processes were examined along with a quantitative analysis of Indiana State University students in order to study a small sample of the entire U.S.A.'s population and explore relevant trends of the students' destructive consumption. After analyzing the results within Microsoft Excel, important findings were that products that fulfill physiological and self-actualization needs are consumed the most, and that an individual's sex does not affect the types of potentially harmful products that he or she may choose to consume.

Keywords: Marketing, Harmful, Consumerism

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, the study of consumer awareness has been highly beneficial in the field of business, especially when considering marketing. Not only has marketing literature over time explored not only how advertising can influence consumers beyond their basic preferences for a product and make certain brands more popular than others (Barroso & Llobet, 2012), but it also has shown that customer loyalty programs can create lower price sensitivity for consumers and stronger brand/product loyalty for consumers (Berman, 2006).

However, even with the plethora of information pertaining to marketing available, there still is a large lack in information revealing how some individuals continue to be customers of certain products that have the capacity to put the well-being of the consumer at risk. Tylenol, for instance, a drug commonly used for headaches and pain relief, contains the drug acetaminophen, which is widely known to lead to liver failure and fatal overdose. According to Alice Park's article "It's Easy to Overdose on Tylenol, Study Warns", "Acetaminophen, which includes Tylenol and other generic brands, causes more than 80,000 emergency room visits each year because people often aren't aware they're taking too much" (2014). Nevertheless, when accounting for this information, it is apparent that Tylenol continues to be sold in large quantities around the world.

Furthermore, when considering unhealthy foods, the following ideas are also known to also remain consistent. According to Mai and Hoffman in their journal "How to Combat the Unhealthy = Tasty Intuition The Influencing Role of Health Consciousness", after conducting a quantitative study to study the relationship between health consciousness and how individuals feel about unhealthy foods being tasty, the research findings revealed that "knowledge about healthiness alone is insufficient to make healthier food choices". In addition to this information,

the writers also mentioned that many of the individuals that create and maintain policies in regards to food regulation don't have access to total control over facts of information that could possibly mold and change how consumers think about the relationship between food healthiness and tastiness, especially due to institutions like the mass media and social relationships/groups (Mai & Hoffmann, 2015). Due to this, many consumers' ways of thinking about certain information, especially when considering destructive or harmful products, are not easily changed or influenced by facts and policy in every situation.

When considering what is unknown about this topic, there is a clear understanding. Why consumers continue to buy these products has been only been explored at a basic level; there is not much research available when scrutinizing the topic, especially when considering information on in-depth various and plausible reasons for this behavior. However, there is a plethora of available information on certain aspects that could affect this consumer behavior separate from the topic, specifically when considering consumer psychology and business functions. If businesses were able to understand why individuals consume dangerous products, they would be able to reach a higher level of efficiency when conducting product sales through their goods and services. Therefore, upon further scrutinizing the connection between destructive consumption and consumer behavior, improved managerial decision making will be created, resulting in higher levels of efficiency and effectiveness.

In order to research this information, the following three sub-topics must be examined:

### **1. Four P's of Marketing**

Understanding the four P's of Marketing (Product, Price, Promotion, and Place) will assist in understanding how variations among businesses have an effect on sales and how strategic tactics may be developed for future improvement. For instance, levels of price

elasticity have a large impact on consumption. Furthermore, placing products in a location to create a fairly monopolistic environment increases consumption. These processes are crucial in the creation of marketing plans in the business world; understanding and mastering these steps could potentially increase productivity and sales for these examined organizations.

## **2. Marketing Environment/External Influences**

A business's marketing environment also has an impact on consumption in this context, mainly through its political/regulatory, economic, and social/cultural environments present. For example, if the economy experienced a large recession and/or inflation increased, goods and services that are higher in cost and are fairly inelastic in demand would most likely experience a large decrease in sales and consumption. Furthermore, according to "The Effects of the External Environment on Marketing Decision-Maker Uncertainty", the marketing environment also has a fairly large impact on uncertainty in consumer decisions when choosing products in the marketplace.

"Both instability of change and environmental complexity are associated with marketing decision-maker uncertainty, with the former having the larger effect. Locus of control moderates the relationships between environmental characteristics and effect and response uncertainty. The findings have implications for theory, managerial practice and research methodology" (Ashill, 2014).

Taking advantage of this information could also potentially explain why consumers tend to make the decision to buy products that are totally designed for their overall benefit.

## **3. Cognitive Processing/Inner-Influences**

When trying to understand consumer rationale behind destructive consumption, consumers' inner mental influences and psychology must be evaluated, through an exploration of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, cognitive dissonance, and how value is created for the customer by the pros outweighing the cons when considering a good or service. This will give marketers the information needed to take advantage of the inner/internal-influences that are able to impact consumers and gain the desired outcome by the organization.

In order to properly investigate each of these sub-topics, data will be gathered from both primary and secondary data. Secondary data will be gathered from previous, external sources through professional publications and presentations. Primary data will be collected by conducting a quantitative study, through the creation of a survey with questions designed specifically for statistical analysis. These statistics will take the form of a regression test as well as descriptive statistics. By creating a quantitative study, the research findings will be highlighted within the study in order to create more valid research through future studies.

Furthermore, due to a lack of funding for research, sampling will be the major limitation of the primary data's study. The sample size within this study will only be comprised of collegiate students from Indiana State University. After analyzing apparent trends within the current university's student population, further studies may be conducted to find a correlation between this sample and the entire population of United States citizens and add to current findings.

In summary, destructive consumer behavior, when broken into the three sub-topics of the Four P's of Marketing, the Marketing Environment, and Cognitive Processing, will be analyzed

through both primary and secondary data in order to provide business leaders with more effective tactics when conducting future operations.

### **4P's of Marketing**

When exploring factors that contribute to this type of consumption, the 4P's of Marketing must be taken into consideration. According to Purely Branded, a highly successful marketing firm based in Ohio, The 4P's of Marketing, or Marketing Mix, a term created by Neil Borden, are "the ingredients that combine to capture and promote a brand or product's unique selling points, those that differentiate it from its competitors", and they include the how a business organizes the type of product, pricing method, placement/distribution, and promotional methods in their marketing plan (2015).

The type of product that is available has an effect on consumption because of its versatility in design and function. More modifications than usual may be available for the product line in question, giving customers more choices among different brands and producers to make their purchase decisions. Due to this information, the more unique or exclusive a product is, the more likely customers will purchase it. Furthermore, the product itself may have pros that outweigh the costs, such as undertaking life-threatening surgery to be able to recover from an accident or going to an amusement park, where there is a risk of injury or death on many featured rides. If the consumer feels that the potential amount of benefit that he or she can gain from a good or service validates the undergone risk, the individual will buy it.

The pricing of the product in question also tends to affect varying levels of consumption. Traditionally, depending on the business's target market, lower prices normally encourage more consumption. However, higher prices may encourage purchases as well, especially when considering products that require extensive decision making on behalf of the consumer. This is

due to quality and price having a positive relationship to an extent. Another consideration within pricing is the cost of producing the good or service in question. For instance, the product that may be potentially dangerous for consumers may be much cheaper to produce; therefore, it may be offered at a cheaper price, yielding a larger profit margin. A prime example of this would be fast food and large beverage companies, which cost relatively little to produce and have substantially larger selling costs.

When considering the “place” component, sales of products that are placed in environments/areas where 1. they are easily accessible by the target market, 2. there are little to no levels of competition tend to thrive much more than products that are not. In a situation where a product is easily accessible by the target market, customers would be able to quickly access it with much less effort, giving the same product a competitive advantage over others. An example of this would be the availability of cars. A safer and reliable car might be located about 200 miles away from a person, while a cheaper, less reliable car might be located less than 10 miles away from the same person. Logically, this person would not likely travel 200 miles to gain a safer car, depending on a number of other factors including value, needs, and other aspects. In a situation where there is little to no competition in a given area, a product would be able to maintain a monopoly or oligopoly in an area, gaining a large amount of profit since customers would not be able to gain it from many other sources.

One of the main reasons that promotion is an important factor in consumption is because potential customers know about the product’s existence along with other important information to consider when making a purchasing decision. In the case of destructive buying habits, many of these customers may only be aware of the harmful products in the marketplace. McDonalds, Johnson & Johnson, and Duke Energy are a few well-known companies known to promote their

goods and services even though they may not be in the best interest of the consumer. If organized and implemented properly, promotional tactics can either make-or-break a marketing campaign's success. According to Duchessi and Lauría, many ski resorts' promotional activities have an immediate and positive reaction on sales that is sustained over time, a remarkable achievement, especially when considering the possible risks that ski resorts could entail for their guests/visitors (2013).

### **Marketing Environment/External Influences**

The influence of the product's marketing environment on its success is also very considerable. The marketing environment entails various external influences that affect the day-to-day operations and success of an organization. The main influences that are pertinent factors to this topic include the 1. political/regulatory environment, 2. economic environment, and 3. social/cultural environment.

In terms of the political/regulatory environment, there may be a chance that some regulations and laws make it easier for businesses to market potentially dangerous products. For instance, when considering the marketing of foods, businesses in the United States were not forced to disclose that their foods contained with GMOs, or genetically modified organisms in prior years. Furthermore, these GMOs have lacked a fairly substantial amount of research to make public-health related decisions with 100% certainty. Because of this lack of regulation and research, citizens in the U.S. were not able to make totally informed decisions when purchasing groceries and were not able to accurately determine the morality of companies, benefiting multiple companies, more notably Monsanto (Goldbas, 2014).

The economic environment affects consumption through macroeconomics, especially when considering consumer discretionary income and inflation. (Grimsley, 2015) Therefore, the

more money individuals have to spend on non-necessary items, and the more value their currency possesses in their economy, the more they will be willing to purchase because they will be subject to a much smaller amount of risk. Elasticity also has an important role when determining what goods and services will receive more, less, and the same levels of purchase during different economic impacts on consumers. For example, if a piece of candy increased in price by two dollars, a large amount of people would no longer buy it; however, if gas increased in price by two dollars, the same amount of people would still buy it. Other examples that would correlate with the gas example would be medicine and basic living expenses. Expressed in another manner, the more necessary a good is for a person to have, the more likely that individual is to buy it, as explained by Reem Heakal:

“An inelastic good or service is one in which changes in price witness only modest changes in the quantity demanded or supplied, if any at all. These goods tend to be things that are more of a necessity to the consumer in his or her daily life” (2015).

The sociocultural economic has a fairly large impact on consumers, especially through interpersonal communications and persuasion. Culture associated with a person’s demographics has an effect on their cognitive responses, beliefs, values, and inevitably their purchases. Furthermore, social groups have a tendency to display “peer pressure” or influence their groups’ members to act in or believe a certain way. According to Eunsoo Baek and Ho Jung Choo’s “Effects of Peer Consumption on Hedonic Purchase Decisions”, “in hedonic consumption situations, the presence of peer consumption influences consumers’ purchase decisions” (2015).

When analyzing how culture can make consumers engage in destructive consumption, values, customs, and beliefs have a direct, apparent connection with potentially harmful purchases. For instance, there is a well-known custom in place that when an individual turns 21

years old, he or she should attend parties, consume alcohol, and gamble on their birthday and/or for a certain amount of time afterwards. Furthermore, there is a common belief that motorcycles and sports car owners feel that they should drive faster than normal, therefore, more recklessly. This is because these are transportation units that are associated in movies and video games like the Fast and the Furious, Transporter, and Grand Turismo, where a stereotype of them being fast and/or exotic has taken place.

### **Cognitive Processing/Inner-Influences**

When describing the various cognitive processes that consumers regularly undergo, understanding Maslow's hierarchy of needs, cognitive dissonance, and value created throughout the buying and consumption processes is necessary in order to understand thought patterns, behavior, and possible situations that could alter these normalized patterns.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs plays an important role in the minds of consumers as they evaluate products to-purchase. According to Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health, Maslow's hierarchy of needs was a theory that was created by Abraham Maslow in order to explain how human motivation works. According to this theory, humans are motivated to take action in order to accomplish various needs that they may have, which are physiological needs, safety needs, love/belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs in order (Aanstoos, 2014).

Furthermore, each tier of the hierarchy can be profitable to different businesses in various ways. According to the British Journal of Nutrition, this hierarchy has a potential correlation with consumption:

“We found that being higher in the pyramid of needs was linked to the consumption of more healthy than unhealthy food outcomes. To some extent, we also found that the fulfilment of needs was socio-economically patterned, because a larger proportion of

higher-educated people reached the level of self-actualisation as opposed to lower-educated people. (Van Lenthe, Jansen, Kamphuis, 2015)”

When an individual is trying to fulfill their physiological and safety needs, he or she will be mostly interested solely in initially fulfilling the need, while not necessarily paying attention to the quality of his or her actions in doing so. An example of this would be trying to obtain food. A person within this physiological need tier would be most likely to consume fast food, like McDonalds, instead of going to a more higher-end restaurant, like Red Lobster. This is because the individual would theoretically be only interested in gaining sustenance, instead of quality nourishment. A safety need example, on the other hand, could involve a customer trying to purchase a weapon to increase his or her safety in their home or during daily activities. Love/belonging and esteem needs can both be seen through how people crave to be a part of social groups and wish to be accepted and wanted. Destructive examples of this include the dating website known for supporting infidelity, Ashley Madison, and addictive levels of use of social media websites. Not only does Ashley Madison allow for unsatisfied individuals in relationships to find solace in another person, satisfied their love/belonging needs, but social media also allows for people to feel more important by gaining likes, followers, shares, etc. on their posts and statuses.

Finally, self-actualization needs allow for a person to unlock their full potential and explore all of the possibilities of what he or she may be or do. People within this category tend to want to find out exactly who they are and what actions and behaviors could possibly benefit them the most, an advantage and disadvantage for businesses, depending on the good or service offered. A prime example of products that would benefit the business include more partaking more extreme activities like sky diving or bungee jumping. These activities, even though

dangerous and possibly fatal, allow for people to experience a level of excitement or an opportunity that they would not be able to while occupied with the other tiers of the hierarchy and responsibilities of day-to-day living. Nevertheless, many businesses that offer potentially harmful and defective products that particularly affiliated with safety and physiological needs will experience a decline of sales from these self-actualized customers. This is due to the products not being able to efficiently achieve its promised outcomes and not being able to fulfill customers' desire to gain products with more quality that are better for their well-being and safety, as described in the Journal of International Marketing:

“Focusing on emerging- versus developed-market comparisons, the findings provide important insights into unique differences in customer perceptions, including the greater importance of quality relative to value in influencing satisfaction in developed markets...” (Morgeson III, Sharma, Hult, 2015).

Cognitive dissonance takes place when “someone holds two or more conflicting attitudes or beliefs about one product or service” (Akers, 2015). Some ways that businesses can reduce customers' cognitive dissonance are by 1. improving public relations, 2. adding customer testimonials, and 3. allowing customer trials to promote the product. By improving public relations, customer will feel that the organization is being more transparent with them by communicating information, even if the information is carefully planned to paint a positive image of the organization. By adding customer testimonials to various communication channels like online shopping areas or official website information, potential customers can learn to not regret their decision to purchase a product because they will know if it functions in their desired manner. Finally, by allowing customer trials to take place, not only is cognitive dissonance eased because the customer is able to see first-hand how the product would work for them, but sales

promotion is increased inherently. This is due to the customers being able to tell others about the advantages and disadvantages of the very product that they tried, building brand confidence and increasing sales through word-of-mouth their social communities and the highly successful and , as explained below:

“Since the advent of...other social media...and...online brand communities and new communication formats—little doubt has existed as to the potential of WOM in boosting a new product's commercial success...Advertisers long have used teaser advertisements and product pre-announcements to create online and offline "buzz" (Thorbjørnsen, Ketelaar, Van 'T Riet, Dahlen, 2015).

### **Value Creation**

One of the main reasons that customers continue to purchase a potentially harmful product is because of the value that it holds for them. Value is considered the difference between the benefits and the costs of a product for a potential customer's decision. Therefore, even though a product may be potentially dangerous and the opportunity costs are fairly large, the benefits could outweigh the costs and the customer will still buy the product, as Shane Frederick explains by stating that “Decisions about whether some expenditure is “worth it” hinge on what the purchase is seen as displacing. Take the extra time to define that, and you can change the way your customers view your value proposition” (2011). For instance, some medicinal, prescription drugs, especially heroin, are highly addictive and can be fatal; however, they are necessary to the health of its user, so they are regularly consumed. Another non-medical related product that fits within this category is pesticides. Each year, according to Organic Consumers Association, 220,000 people worldwide are killed by pesticides per year; however, many individuals continuously purchase these products in order to conduct pest control in their homes and other

regularly-frequented environments (Shiva, 2010). By businesses continuously creating more benefits for their products, customers will continue to be frequent, recurring shoppers, improving Customer Relationship Management.

### **Survey Construction**

In order to create a survey that would potentially be the foundation for future studies, six questions were created in order to measure the cognitive processes of individuals when undergoing the buying process of harmful products. After the first two demographic questions of age and gender, the survey contained the following questions:

#### Likert Scale – 1 - 5; 1 (Never), 5 (A lot)

1. I buy things that are bad for me.
2. When I buy things that are bad for me, I have conflicting opinions about it.
3. Researching the products is important when I'm hesitant about buying a product.

#### Open-Ended Question

1. What do you buy the most that is bad for you?

The three Likert-scale questions were easily measurable, due to the five numbers that the participants were forced to choose from. On the other hand, the open-ended question was more difficult to measure, statistically. Because of this, after participants stated what they bought the most, the product was put into categories according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. For example, if the participant stated that they bought weapons, they bought products that satisfy a safety need; likewise, if he or she stated that they ate a lot of fast food for their daily meals, this would constitute a physiological need.

### **Results**

After all of the participants were questioned, the data was calculated via Microsoft Excel, where the following findings were discovered:

<b>Relevant Descriptive Statistics</b>	
<b><u>Sex</u></b>	
No. of Female	23
No. of Male	26
<b><u>Age</u></b>	
Average	20.53061
Max.	24
Min.	18
<b><u>Averages</u></b>	
Bad for Me	3.234694
Conflicting Opinions	3.387755
Hesitant	2.612245
<b><u>Maslow's Hierarchy</u></b>	
Physiology	26
Safety	2
Love/Belonging	3
Esteem	3
Self-Actualization	15

When interpreting the results of the descriptive statistics, it may be concluded that there was a fairly even distribution of males and females, with males having the majority. The average age of the participants was 21 years old rounded, with 24 and 18 years old being the maximum and minimum ages, respectively. When considering how this group felt about the first two questions, they, on average, remained fairly neutral, meaning that they sometimes engaged in these behaviors. Deviating from this pattern was the question on hesitation, which the participants responded with a 2.61, meaning that they engaged in these behaviors much less.

To understand the question “What do you buy the most that is bad for you?”, a classification model according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs was developed, as mentioned before. When considering the results, 26 individuals buy goods and services that are in the physiological category, two people bought things that are safety-related, three people bought products related to fulfilling love/belonging needs and esteem needs each, and 15 people bought products that would potentially fulfill needs in the self-actualization category. Therefore, because of these results, the following hypothesis can be created: Most United States citizens buy products that are related to fulfilling physiological- and self-actualization-related needs further studies could be developed in order to test the entire population of college students and, eventually, the entire United States population.

When creating a regression test to test the hypothesis that sex can affect how students’ destructive needs, the relationship between sex and where students felt they had the most destructive needs in terms of Maslow’s hierarchy, the results were highly straightforward, as detailed below:

SUMMARY OUTPUT		Relationship between Sex and Maslow's Hierarchy							
<i>Regression Statistics</i>									
Multiple R	0.048493181								
R Square	0.002351589								
Adjusted R Square	-0.018874973								
Standard Error	1.842891725								
Observations	49								
<i>ANOVA</i>									
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>				
Regression	1	0.376254181	0.376254181	0.110785187	0.740732129				
Residual	47	159.6237458	3.396249911						
Total	48	160							
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>	
Intercept	2.653846154	0.361420803	7.342815174	2.47413E-09	1.926761283	3.380931025	1.926761283	3.380931025	
Sex	-0.175585284	0.527530128	-0.332844088	0.740732129	-1.236839015	0.885668447	-1.236839015	0.885668447	

According to these results, because the significance F is .7407 rounded, which is above .05, indicates that an individual's sex does not have any significant impact on what their destructive-need patterns are. Further investigation into the lower columns meant for each variable shows that the p-value for sex is also .7407 rounded, supplying additional reason to reject the proposed hypothesis. Due to this information, further studies should be conducted in order to find other reasons to explain the variability in choices for destructive consumption.

### **Conclusion**

When taking the stance of businesses that sell products and services that could potentially harm or have ill-intent for end-consumers, marketing research holds a large amount of importance for producers and information-related departments. This is due to the research having information on what would potentially make the consumer purchase the good or service in question. Furthermore, the information most desired for these business decisions and considerations should be concentrated primarily around the four P's of marketing in order to understand how logistics and product-based decisions can affect potential levels of consumption and the success of a product, the marketing environment/external influences that could affect the business and its stakeholders, and the cognitive processes and inner influences that take place within and affect the mind of the consumer when evaluating products. In order to fully understand this information, quantitative information was explored with an objective of compiling findings that can aid managers and corporate leaders to make more informed decisions in the future.

Goods and services that are communicated to fulfill self-actualization and physiological needs seem to harbor the most importance for the majority of students within this study, and since sex is not an important factor, further studies to figure out not only other important factors,

but also understand the full population, instead of a sample, are advised to take place. The relevance of these findings is high due to the idea that consumption takes place every day, multiple times for the human population; especially when considering clothes chosen to wear, food eaten, medication taken, places visited, interactions, etc. Due to this, this information can be applied to multiple, if not all, industries in the United States of America and, from a broader perspective, the world. Furthermore, other disciplines may utilize this information even if they may not be engaged formally in the creation and selling of harmful goods, ideas, and services in order to create higher assurance that their products will be well-received, especially if a 100% consensus of liking is not established. Nevertheless, business leaders in today's society will need to understand markets and how to appeal to them in various ways, especially in today's ever-changing world and society.

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