

ÁREA TEMÁTICA: MARKETING

**CONSUMPTION AS REWARD: EVERYDAY JUSTIFICATIONS
FOR EMOTIONALLY COMPENSATORY PURCHASES –
RESEARCH NOTES**



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ABSTRACT: This theoretical study seeks to highlight how consumers employ emotional justifications to validate unplanned purchasing decisions, particularly after intense workweeks or everyday stress. Drawing on recent literature, it discusses consumption as a form of reward and emotional self-regulation, legitimised by narratives such as “I deserve it” or “It’s been a tough week.” These rationalisations function as mechanisms for guilt reduction and meaning-making in relation to consumption habits that align with hedonic consumption. Accordingly, the aim of this discussion is to outline theoretical pathways for understanding the subjective factors underpinning compensatory consumption, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of the connections between emotions, perceived effort, and purchasing behaviour. The paper also highlights implications for marketing practices and opens avenues for future empirical research incorporating dimensions of gender, social class, and generation.

Keywords: Emotional consumption; Purchase justification; Subjective reward; Perceived effort.

RESUMO: O presente estudo teórico buscar apontar como consumidores utilizam justificativas emocionais para validar decisões de compra não planejadas, especialmente após semanas intensas de trabalho ou estresse cotidiano. Com base em literatura recente, discute-se o consumo como forma de recompensa e autorregulação emocional, sendo legitimado por narrativas como “eu mereço” ou “foi uma semana difícil”. Tais racionalizações funcionam como mecanismos de redução de culpa e construção de sentido frente a hábitos de consumo que se alinham ao consumo hedônico. Logo, o objetivo desta discussão é traçar caminhos teóricos para compreender os fatores subjetivos que sustentam o consumo por compensação, contribuindo para a compreensão dos vínculos entre emoções, esforço percebido e comportamento de compra. O trabalho aponta implicações para práticas de marketing e abre caminhos para futuras pesquisas empíricas com recortes de gênero, classe e geração.

Palavras-chave: Consumo emocional; Justificação de compra; Recompensa subjetiva; Esforço percebido.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of contemporary life, characterised by intense work schedules, multiple demands and ongoing emotional strain, consumption has increasingly become, for many individuals, a form of subjective reward. Expressions such as “I deserve it” or “it’s been a tough week” reflect attempts to legitimise impulsive or hedonic purchasing behaviours based on emotional justifications (Da Luz Colomé, 2016; Oliveira & Arruda Filho, 2019). This pattern of rationalisation reveals a symbolic dimension of consumption: not merely as a response to functional needs, but as a strategy for emotional regulation and psychological relief.

Compensatory consumption is triggered when individuals perceive an incongruity between the effort expended and the emotional return received, seeking in the acquisition of goods or experiences a sense of balance or control (Moreira, 2018; Oliveira & Arruda Filho, 2021). This behaviour is intensified by contexts of stress, fatigue or frustration, where consumption functions as a coping mechanism (Pineiro, 2011). Accordingly, the effort perceived enhances the feeling of entitlement, even when the purchase is neither financially nor morally justified.

This tendency, reinforced by digital influencers and empowerment narratives, often masks patterns of impulsive consumption and indebtedness (Batista, 2020).

Based on these initial considerations, the present study aims to discuss, from a theoretical perspective, how individuals justify their purchases through emotions and subjective perceptions of effort and entitlement. By investigating the subjective rationalisations underpinning hedonic consumption from the standpoint of emotional reward, this work seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on consumer behaviour and its ethical, social and economic implications.

This article is organised as follows: following this introductory overview, the main variables and their interrelations are discussed; then, a theoretical model under development is presented; finally, the conclusion synthesises the discussion and outlines potential contributions, limitations, and future directions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Emotional Consumption

Emotional consumption can be defined as the act of purchasing products or services in response to emotional states, particularly negative ones such as stress, frustration, fatigue, or anxiety. In this context, consumption functions as a form of emotional coping aimed at restoring the individual’s psychological balance (Xavier, 2014). This behaviour has become increasingly prevalent in

societies marked by high productivity demands, performance pressure, and mental exhaustion, as highlighted by recent literature on mental health and urban consumption patterns (Reis, 2019).

Emotional consumption differs from other purchasing behaviours in that it is not directly linked to functional or utilitarian needs, but rather to the pursuit of immediate emotional relief (Xavier, 2014). Here, the act of buying serves as a “gift to oneself,” even if the consumer subsequently experiences regret or guilt. This cycle, negative emotion, purchase, relief, guilt, tends to repeat, especially when healthier forms of emotional regulation are unavailable.

This behaviour may be amplified in contexts marked by fatigue or a sense of everyday injustice. When individuals feel emotionally overwhelmed, they may resort to shopping as a symbolic means of regaining agency over their lives, albeit temporarily (Brasil, 2023).

Therefore, emotional consumption is not merely an individual behaviour but a socially shaped practice with psychological and market implications. Understanding this phenomenon is essential for critical analyses of contemporary consumer culture.

2.2 Perceived Effort and Sense of Deservingness

The sense of deservingness in consumption is a psychosocial phenomenon that emerges when individuals perceive that significant physical, emotional or cognitive effort warrants the acquisition of something pleasurable or symbolic. This perception is rooted in the theory of effort justification (Brustolin, 2018), which has been adapted in contemporary literature to the context of consumer behaviour.

Consumers often evaluate their purchasing decisions based on the intensity of prior effort (De Souza Barros, 2016). The greater the perceived sacrifice, the stronger the feeling of being entitled to a reward. This phenomenon is observed in both routine consumption contexts and more exceptional situations, such as travel, gourmet experiences, or luxury goods. In this sense, consumption becomes a tangible symbol of personal recognition, an emotionally self-bestowed reward (Alves, 2023).

Recent studies show that this type of rationalisation is particularly common among young urban professionals who face excessive workloads and performance pressure (Alves, 2023). Consumption, in response to such pressure, reinforces an internalised meritocratic logic in which deservingness is linked to accumulated physical and mental strain.

Moreover, the relationship between effort and reward is also shaped by cultural norms and social narratives. In Brazil, for instance, advertising campaigns frequently appeal to this sentiment with slogans such as “you deserve this” or “treat yourself to the best.” These advertising appeals reinforce consumption as a legitimate practice of self-reward and validate emotionally driven purchasing decisions (Xavier, 2014).

Thus, perceived effort and the feeling of deservingness act as catalysts for hedonic consumption, legitimising behaviours that, in the absence of such emotional support, might be questioned by the consumers themselves.

2.3 Subjective Rewards

The rationalisation of consumption involves the process by which individuals construct subjective explanations to validate their purchasing decisions, especially when these go against social norms or personal expectations of financial control. This is a cognitive mechanism aimed at reducing the dissonance between the desire to consume and the need to maintain a coherent self-image (Mantello, 2012). In contemporary settings, such justifications have become increasingly common, particularly in light of the emotional burden of daily life.

Research has demonstrated that consumers frequently develop rational arguments to justify hedonic consumption decisions (Machado, 2022). Narratives such as “I worked too hard this week,” “it was a rough day,” or “I deserve a treat” emerge as legitimate ways of validating behaviours that might initially appear impulsive or unnecessary. These justifications function as moral regulators that allow consumers to preserve a sense of control and coherence, even in impulsive purchases (Lopes, 2020; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023).

This rationalisation is also closely linked to discourses of self-care and wellbeing. In the Brazilian context, many female consumers interpret consumption as a legitimate expression of self-care, bolstered by media messages and the practices of digital influencers. Thus, consumption ceases to be merely an economic act and becomes embedded in identity and affective discourses.

The risk of such rationalisation lies in the normalisation of consumption behaviours that may lead to indebtedness, regret, or emotional dependence on shopping as a source of satisfaction (Bashar, 2023). While subjectively functional in the short term, this form of rationalisation can obscure patterns of compulsive or dysregulated consumption.

Hence, understanding how subjective justifications operate in purchasing decisions is essential for critically examining how individuals negotiate emotions, desires and values within the marketplace.

2.4 Consumption Justification

Consumption justification can be understood not merely as an intermediary rationalisation mechanism, but as the final product of an emotional and behavioural cycle involving perceived effort, negative emotions, and hedonic self-regulation (Gomes, 2020). In this sense, it operates as a cognitive synthesis that socially and individually legitimises the act of consumption, especially in contexts of hedonic and unplanned purchases.

When consumers experience physical or emotional exhaustion, the act of purchasing may be preceded by a justificatory narrative that renders the action acceptable within their own moral framework (Victor, 2021). Such a narrative acts as a “permission seal,” transforming a potentially guilt-inducing action into a legitimate gesture of self-care or reward. Thus, justification is not merely a trigger but the endpoint of the emotional coping process enacted through consumption (Silva, 2014).

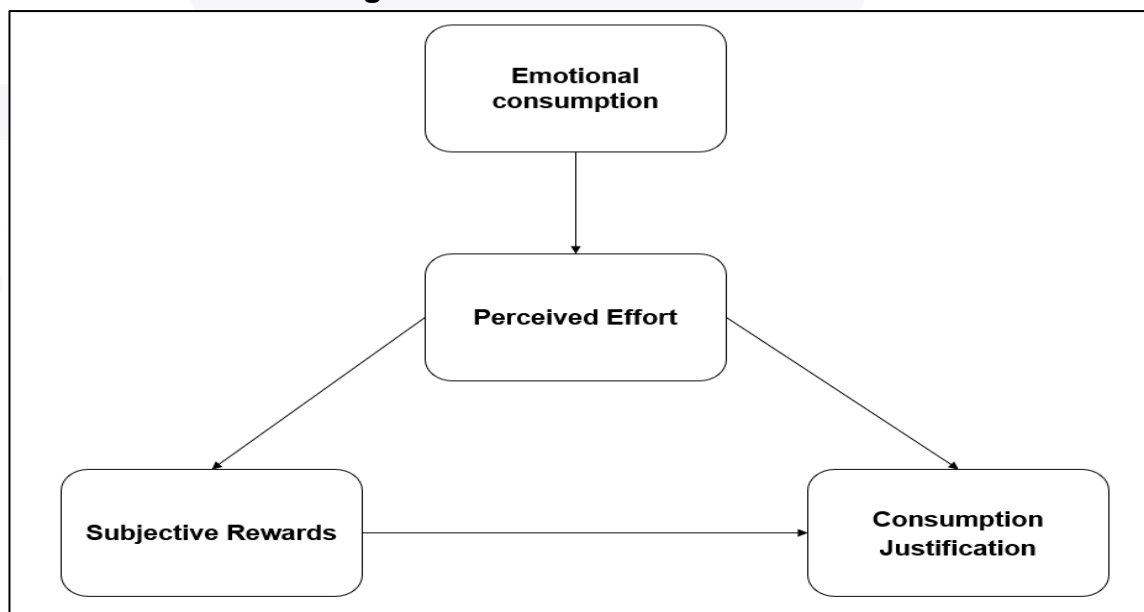
It follows that consumers with a heightened perception of effort tend to elaborate stronger and more convincing justifications for their purchases as a means of protecting their self-image (Gomes, 2020). This logic becomes even more pronounced when social factors, such as online visibility, or economic constraints, such as budget limitations, are involved. These justifications, therefore, operate as psychological and symbolic buffers (Gomes, 2020).

Accordingly, consumption justification should be regarded as both a mediating and conclusive variable within the cycle under analysis: it consolidates and normalises the behaviour, serving as an interpretive key for both consumer and market. Analysing this process offers a valuable opportunity to understand how emotional decisions are reframed as rational actions in individual discourse.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK PROPOSAL

Figure 1 below presents a synthetic and visual representation of the interrelation between the theoretical variables discussed throughout this paper. This is a preliminary model intended to facilitate the understanding of possible causal relationships among the central concepts.

Figure 1 – Theoretical model.



Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

The construction of this graphic representation allows for a clearer visualisation of how theoretical elements are interconnected, aiding in the formulation of hypotheses, the refinement of the conceptual model, and the guidance of future empirical research.

It is important to stress that this model is neither definitive nor exhaustive. On the contrary, it constitutes an initial foundation that can (and should) be refined in light of new empirical findings, peer-review feedback, or deeper theoretical discussions. As such, the figure functions as a starting point for academic debate, open to modification and improvement as understanding of the phenomenon evolves. It should therefore be seen as a dynamic and evolving representation.

Drawing from the theoretical design illustrated in Figure 1, it is essential to describe the proposed causal relationships for improved clarity. In this framework, emotional consumption is defined as the act of purchasing in response to one's emotional state, gaining particular strength when negative reactions (stress, frustration, fatigue or anxiety) are involved. In an attempt to regulate emotions, emotional consumption arises as an option (Xavier, 2014), becoming the initial construct in the decision-making process.

In this regard, authors such as Reis (2019) and Alves (2023) identify a growing pattern in this behaviour, increasingly prevalent in societies marked by over-productivity, performance pressure and mental exhaustion. Young individuals, in particular, are highlighted as the demographic most affected by this lifestyle. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Emotional consumption has a positive effect on perceived effort.

This premise stems from the understanding that negative emotional states heighten the perception of fatigue and accumulated effort, establishing a foundation for the subjective interpretation of personal sacrifice. It emerges as an attempt to restore balance in the face of daily overload (Xavier, 2014; Reis, 2019). Thus, consumption operates in response to a prior perception of effort, reinforcing the idea that negative emotions not only trigger the desire to consume but also reshape how much one believes they have 'endured,' intensifying the sense of deservedness in the face of fatigue.

Subsequently, perceived effort emerges as the consequence of emotional consumption. It is a psychosocial mechanism whereby individuals who recognise having exerted physical, emotional or cognitive energy feel entitled to pleasurable reward. This phenomenon plays a significant role in consumption decisions (De Souza Barros, 2016), as it follows the rationale that the greater the effort involved, the stronger the entitlement to a reward. Thus, perceived effort becomes the predictive element of subjective reward. Based on this, we propose:

H2: Perceived effort has a positive effect on subjective reward.

Perceived effort acts as a catalyst for constructing symbolic reward. The literature indicates that the greater the perceived sacrifice, the stronger the

feeling of deserving a form of compensation (De Souza Barros, 2016; Brustolin, 2018). Effort—whether physical, emotional or cognitive—serves as the psychological basis that legitimises the desire for gratification, converting consumption into a compensatory act. In this way, perceived effort functions as an antecedent of subjective reward.

Within this context, subjective reward results from perceived effort and the sense of deservingness, as these act as generative components of this construct. Subjective reward enables individuals to construct explanations to justify spending on goods or services that may initially appear unnecessary, but are reframed as sources of control and coherence (Lopes, 2020; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023). Based on this understanding, we present the following proposition:

H3: Perceived effort has a positive effect on consumption justification.

The intensity of perceived effort contributes to the development of justificatory narratives that render consumption a socially and personally acceptable decision. In emotionally overburdened states, individuals may employ purchasing as a symbolic act of recovery, with consumers tending to formulate justifications for their behaviour (Gomes, 2020). In this light, accumulated effort not only reinforces the desire to consume, but also stimulates the development of internal arguments that validate the act, operating as a psychological defence mechanism against guilt or regret. Finally, we propose:

H4: Subjective reward has a positive effect on consumption justification.

The perception of having been subjectively rewarded helps consolidate consumption as a legitimate and coherent practice aligned with personal values. The literature suggests that subjective reward offers explanations that justify purchases otherwise deemed unnecessary (Lopes, 2020; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023). Thus, consumption justification becomes more salient when consumers have internalised the sense of having “treated themselves” (Gomes, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to understand, from a theoretical standpoint, how individuals construct emotional justifications to validate consumption decisions, particularly in contexts marked by stress, overload and perceived effort. It was demonstrated that hedonic consumption can function as a mechanism of emotional self-regulation, in which the sense of deservingness and subjective rationalisation play central roles.

Building upon the proposed theoretical framework, it is argued that consumption justification not only precedes purchasing behaviour but also consolidates it as a legitimised practice. It serves as the final element in an

emotional cycle that begins with perceived effort and culminates in self-reward (Oliveira & Arruda Filho, 2021). This dynamic reveals not only a recurrent pattern among contemporary consumers but also highlights the influence of social narratives that associate self-care with the act of consumption.

The theoretical relevance of this discussion lies in the articulation of variables traditionally treated in isolation, effort, emotion, and cognitive justification, and their integration into an explanatory model that frames consumption as a response to psychological and social pressures. The study also offers critical insights for the field of marketing by warning of the risks inherent in strategies that exploit consumer emotional vulnerability.

Among the limitations of this study is its exclusively theoretical and interpretative nature, which calls for empirical validation in future research. It is suggested that future studies adopt both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore differences in consumption justification formation across gender, class and age groups, as well as experiments examining the influence of advertising language on the feeling of deservingness.

In conclusion, this study seeks to contribute to a more critical understanding of emotional consumption practices and to foster the development of more ethical approaches within marketing communication.

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