

# Instant gratification mentalities in popular culture and their roots in evolution...

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Instant Gratification Mentalities in Popular Culture and Their Roots in Evolutionary and Cognitive Psychology Man and culture have an interesting history. Before the existence of religion, hunter-gatherers optimized their behavior for survival, and traits in favor of living in the moment were evolutionarily successful. If our early human counterpart found food, he needed to eat as much as he possibly could because he did not know when he would find his next meal. With the advent of religion, man began to delay gratification in this life so he may be rewarded in the next.

Since man deviated from the shibboleth that his life is lived so that he may be granted entrance to heaven, the repressed urges and the associated cognitive biases for instant gratification have begun to re-emerge, and are evident in every aspect of today's culture: our means of recreation, the manner in which we treat our bodies, and in our business and economic practices. Today, science is tackling the explanations of our tendencies for instant gratification in terms of heuristics: shortcuts in analysis that are hardwired into our brain to optimize survival.

We are evolutionarily programmed to employ these cognitive biases, to use our energy sparingly, to “be frugal with our mental resources” (Sundar 74); the use of these heuristics is an adaptation that explains our proclivity for all these myopic behaviors definitive of our popular culture. The theme of instant gratification has its roots in Horace's “Carpe Diem,” which intended for the individual to utilize each moment to reach a personal goal for their life.

It evolved into existentialism, which is represented in popular culture by Fight Club, a novel by Chuck Palahniuk, adapted to the popular feature film. Fight Club suggests that one should seize the moment to follow his life's passion, to go to school to become a veterinarian, rather than bide your time with distractions. This message is convoluted by mainstream entertainment media to mean that one should live in the moment and avoid thinking about the future by drunken partying and one night stands.

The lyrics of Katy Perry's "Last Friday Night"??? which peaked at number 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts on July 30th of this year??? sum it up quite well: "Yeah we danced on tabletops And we took too many shots Think we kissed but I forgot Last Friday night Yeah we maxed our credit cards And got kicked out of the bar So we hit the boulevard Last Friday night We went streaking in the park Skinny dipping in the dark Then had a menage a trios Last Friday night Yeah I think we broke the law"

Katy Perry's recreational escapades, as well as the song's popular relatability, is a perfect example of the "affect heuristic" (Finucane 1) by which we are programmed to equate an initially pleasurable stimulus with low risk. As humans, we harbor this "inverse relationship between perceived risk and perceived benefit... because people rely on affect when judging the risk and benefit of specific hazards" (Finucane 1). In context, Katy Perry believes the risk of her rampant drunkenness, threesomes, and excessive money expenditure to be low because their initial "affect" is of pleasure.

In reality, the relationship between risk and benefit is positive, meaning that "activities that are low in benefit are unlikely to be high in risk" (Finucane

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3). In our minds, however, we have this idea that if we like an activity, its risks are low and its benefits are high. Katy Perry seems to enjoy the immediate emotional “affect” of her destructive conduct, so she evaluates the risk of her drunkenness as low, although she is probably very familiar with alcohol’s long term health risks.

In addition to our specie’s use of the affect heuristic to assess the health risks and benefits of our recreational activities as evidenced by our specimen, Katy Perry??? which is analogous to the positive initial “affect,” or high, as an individual chooses to partake in hard drugs; by Finucane’s affect heuristic, this positive feeling translates into an assessment of low risk to the drug user??? we use other cognitive biases each time we make decisions about how we treat our bodies.

America’s obesity epidemic can be partially explained by the unit bias, which proves that “people seem to think that a unit of some entity (with certain constraints) is the appropriate and optimal amount” (Geier1). While all humans tend to eat in increments of 1 serving, Americans eat much larger portions than in European cultures: yogurt sold in the US typically is packaged in 8-ounce servings, while yogurt in a French market is typically sold in 5-ounce servings.

Europeans don’t adjust their number of servings so that the mass of food matches that consumed by Americans; they therefore consume fewer calories and have a lower incidence of obesity. The prevalence and diagnosis of ADHD has increased from 3 to 12 percent, according to the American Society of Pediatrics (Ramer), which indicates??? whether it is a matter of

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mistaken over-diagnosis or a real increase??? the growing inability of children and adults to delay gratification and focus on one thing at a time.

Ramer claims that the higher incidence of ADHD is an “?? inevitable fall-out of an information-overload society??? or job-related stress...’If you’re asked to multi-task all the time, it promotes behaviors that can look similar to ADHD. “ Although the amphetamines prescribed to those without ADHD have to substantial cognitive effect, their use has been increasingly prevalent, which leads scientists to believe that the placebo effect is at work.

Individuals without ADHD take amphetamines they expect to elicit a state of focused attention, and by the placebo effect they unconsciously modify their behavior and even their neurological state to be more focused. Perhaps the most interesting place to find logical inconsistencies is in economic policy and business practices, which are intended to be games of hard numbers. A common business practice intended to maximize profit is to lay off the employees in a company in order to eliminate the cost of their salary.

As this practice has become more and more prevalent, it has unemployed a huge market of consumers that no longer have money to purchase any products or services. In an instance of hyperbolic discounting, the companies opt for a short term cut in costs rather than maintain their revenue in the long run (Muller). A bias for herd behavior in the stock market leads to the formation of “ bubbles. ” Economists found that “ information cascades can affect even perfectly rational people and cause ubble-like phenomena” (Schiller) by which people follow the behaviors of others and decide to buy or sell a certain stock. This cognitive bias led the stock market to crash in 1929.

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Essentially, the idea that we use these heuristics exposes our propensity to utilize cognitive shortcuts to make decisions. Current research in cognitive science elucidates the many errors in cognition we make daily by empirically testing these theories with experiments.

Conversely, it's interesting to explore how these heuristics put our species at an evolutionary advantage. As neuroimaging technology continues to develop, we can expect to see an answer to the question of how we think and make decisions??? and, perhaps, find a way to overcome the biases that define the erroneous beliefs that define humanity. Works Cited Finucane, Melissa L. "The affect heuristic in judgments of risks and benefits" *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*; Jan/Mar 2000; 13, 1; ABI/INFORM Global pg. -17 Geier, Andrew B. "Unit Bias a New Heuristic That Helps Explain the Effect of Portion Size on Food Intake." *Psychological Science* 17. 6 (2006): 521-24. Print. Herbert, Wray. *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-wired Habits*. New York: Crown, 2010. Print. Ramer, Jeanette C. "Research| Penn State: Has There Been an Increase in ADHD?" *Research| Penn State Home Page*. The Pennsylvania State University, 2006. Web. 23 Oct. 2011. ; <http://www.rps.psu.edu/probing/adhd.tml>; Muller, Greg. "Hyperbolic Discounting ?? The Everything Seminar." *The Everything Seminar*. Cornell Math, 2008. Web. 23 Oct. 2011. ; <http://cornellmath.wordpress.com/2008/02/25/hyperbolic-discounting/>; Shiller, Robert J. "How a Bubble Stayed Under the Radar – New York Times." *The New York Times – Breaking News, World News ; Multimedia*. NY Times, Mar. -Apr. 2008. Web. 23 Oct. 2011. ; [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/business/02view.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/business/02view.html?_r=1);

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