Atemporal Gratification and Its Role in
Creating Digital Meta-Value within Organizations

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Abstract

The current organizational environment has studied the concept of delayed gratification; meanwhile, the actual digital disruption represents a catalyst of technological testing and development. This aspect raises the question of inhibiting immediate gratification, which might never lead to the pursuit of the organization's initially proposed long-term goals but might offer new possibilities for adapting to new technologies and finding value beyond its initially proposed purpose (explored under the term "meta-value" in this paper). Therefore, in this context, gratification might become atemporal, whilst the value of digital strategies or technological tools can change. This paper explores the aspect of atemporality in the gratification process through an analysis of the currently existing theoretical background of the gratification paradigm to assess the capacity for self-regulation and the voluntary postponement of gratification, and research its possible links with the value creation processes of an organization, as the gratification process is usually associated with personal behavior. At the same time, it can also be subject to an organizational decision-making process. The study uses a phenomenological research design, conducted through 15 in-depth interviews, to thoroughly explore digital marketing experts' perspectives on atemporal gratification and to identify the creation patterns of digital meta-value for organizations. By value creation, this paper means the value of technological tools in the process of digital adaptation processes and strategic implementation in the marketing domain for organizations. This study might not indefinitely bring the concept of "atemporal gratification" into the marketing domain but represents a first step into the exploration of possibilities to analyze gratification beyond the currently existing theoretical and practical backgrounds and find a new perspective upon the value creation process in the current digitally disrupted environment, which is faced by organizations.

Keywords:
Delayed Gratification, Atemporal Gratification, Digital Disruption, Digital Value, Meta-Value.

Introduction

We inhabit a globalized environment where technology, particularly information and communication technology, is transforming how organizations generate and acquire value, the locations and methods of our labor, and our interactions and communications. Currently, five technologies are revolutionizing the core of global commerce and the entities that facilitate it: cloud and mobile computing, big data and machine learning, sensors and intelligent manufacturing, sophisticated robots and drones, and clean-energy technology. These technologies are not only enhancing efficiency and speed but are also facilitating significant transformations in organizational work processes. Murray (2015, p. 6) asserts that these advances are propelling us toward a new technological revolution, and in 2024, we can confirm that it is happening. Astute corporate executives recognize the necessity of understanding

how new technologies will revolutionize their enterprises or risk being disrupted by competitors who grasp this transformation first.

The current digital dynamic is offering us multiple perspectives upon the process of value creation within organizations. Due to the current digital disruption, consumers' and employees' levels of adaptability to actual technological innovations, market evolution and organizational desire to constantly evolve and gratify their consumers, there is a persistent conflict between the desire to embrace the now and the inclination to plan for the future. Organizations differ in their choices concerning this matter. Some strategies prioritize immediate gratification regardless of the impact, while others aim to act in ways that benefit their future, or even the domain's future. An illustrative example of this distinction is how organizations invest strategically and financially in technological advancements to grow their market presence or raise brand awareness. But what really makes this process intriguing from an academic perspective is the way organizations prioritize gratification in the context of value creation. We can observe multiple reasons why organizations seek technological advancement. Some of them are related to the desire of becoming pioneers of the domain and create state of the art technology, others are related to keeping relevance among competition, but this study has an objective to observe the process of value creation and identify at which decisional point do experts decide if a specific technological advancement, digital innovation brings added value to the organization or uplifts an existing value of that particular technological advancement or digital innovation on the market, by offering it a new use and impact.

Literature review

Gratification theory and its temporality

The uses and gratifications theory is a communication framework that elucidates the motivations and methods through which individuals engage with media to fulfill particular needs. The idea asserts that media is a readily accessible commodity, with audiences acting as its consumers, who select media to fulfill specific requirements and social or psychological functions, including knowledge acquisition, relaxation, social interaction, and entertainment (Ruggiero, 2000).

The uses and gratifications idea emerged from several preceding communication theories and research undertaken by other scholars. The theory has heuristic relevance, as it provides academic communication with a framework for examining many ideas and theories related to media selection, consumption, and effects (Niu et al., 2024). Thus, the uses and gratifications perspective, despite being largely neglected by many studies, serves as a robust theory in elucidating the role of personal motives in contexts such as mobile media, where both utilitarian and non-utilitarian factors influence individual media consumption (Sultan et al., 2009).

The delay of gratification paradigm was established by Mischel and Ebbesen (1970) to investigate self-regulation and the voluntary postponement of rewards. The research indicates that the cognitive mechanisms governing the capacity to delay gratification and exert self-control are influenced by attachment style in persons with insecure attachment. Mischel and fellow researchers conducted multiple experiments

demonstrating that attention control strategies used to divert an individual from temptation and the challenges of postponing gratification enabled the exercise of requisite willpower to maintain a delay (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999).

When it comes to organizations, investment in a project with a long-term or unknown objective is driven by an inherent assumption that the investment will yield returns over time (March, 1991; Murphy & Topel, 2007). The effort and perseverance required to achieve an outcome should correlate with the duration between the decision to pursue a new goal and its completion (i.e., longer delays necessitate increased effort) and the anticipated return on investment from the goal (i.e., greater rewards demand more effort to endure smaller losses).

A postponement of gratification does not necessarily yield a superior reward; it may merely indicate that the identical benefit is obtained later. Consequently, one may inquire whether instant gratification constitutes detrimental behavior, while the capacity to defer gratification, associated in studies with favorable social, academic, behavioral, and cognitive results (Ayduk et al., 2000), is deemed commendable.

There are clear situations in which an inability to postpone satisfaction results in consequences, either affecting the magnitude of the reward or influencing an unrelated behavior or event. A correlation between delay of gratification, regarded as an indicator of self-control (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999), and attachment style has been identified (Jacobsen, 1998). Delay of gratification is regarded as the antithesis of impulsivity. In most literature, delay of gratification is defined as the capacity to forgo immediate gains to maintain goal-directed behavior in pursuit of superior long-term rewards. From a decision-making standpoint, delay of gratification is a cognitive process characterized by a preference for a more remote reward over an immediate one.

Some experts have attempted to equate the delay of pleasure with ego control, self-regulation, and self-control. Consequently, in contrast to impulsiveness, which is marked by rash decision-making, postponement of gratification is defined by deliberate, future-oriented, and goal-directed behavior. Numerous studies have demonstrated that individual differences in the capacity to delay gratification are associated with variations in overall performance (Niu et al., 2024).

This theoretical background leads us to understand that the temporality of gratification directly affects goal-directed behavior, suggesting that, in highly technologically developed organizations, innovation outcomes are closely associated with the capability for delayed gratification. Nevertheless, what interests this matter are the adopted technological solutions that can drive domain innovation without a guarantee of gratification. Delayed gratification offers us assurance of gratification in the future, while so-called atemporal gratification is about gratification with a minimal likelihood of occurring.

Atemporal gratification in the context of the value creation process

Digitalization and digital technologies profoundly alter value creation in markets marked by demand heterogeneity, impacting business model innovation and value creation across several critical domains (Lanzolla et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023;

Lehmann et al., 2022). Initially, they expand the range of products and services that vendors can offer consumers, thereby improving customization and addressing varied consumer demands (Abou-Foul et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Secondly, they broaden the scope for vendors, enabling them to engage a broader range of prospective buyers, thereby enhancing market penetration and accessibility (Sullivan & Wamba, 2024). Thirdly, digitalization diminishes the search costs associated with identifying the ideal buyer-seller match, hence expediting transactions and improving market efficiency (Benner & Waldfogel, 2023). Ultimately, digitalization provides significant insights into unmet consumer demands, supplying essential data that can propel product innovation and development. These dynamics suggest significant opportunities to develop or refine theories of the effects of digitalization on market scope, value chain reconfiguration, and business model innovation or reconfiguration (Massa et al., 2017).

Value creation entails transforming resources into valuable outputs through diligent effort, encompassing the generation of tangible goods and services. It pertains to the process of creating further value for stakeholders, surpassing the original investment or contribution. It also encompasses investments in capital goods and intellectual property assets. Value creation fundamentally involves optimizing existing resources, and it is pivotal to the success of any firm (Eriksson et al., 2024).

The notion of value creation transcends just profit-seeking. It includes various elements, such as enhancing products and services, cultivating robust customer relationships, promoting innovation, and contributing positively to the community and the environment. Understanding the concept of value creation is fundamentally linked to sustainability (Cabral et al., 2019). Enterprises must continually innovate and adjust to evolving market dynamics. This involves optimizing operations, enhancing products, and fostering a culture of excellence. Organizations must continually strive to improve their value-generation techniques.

In the current, rapidly evolving corporate landscape, innovation and differentiation are essential components of value creation. They distinguish successful firms by empowering them to not only adapt to shifting market dynamics and changing customer preferences but also to spearhead advancements in their respective industries (Qiao et al., 2024). Let us examine this concept more thoroughly. For example, Mazzucato (2024) mentions that perpetual innovation is a critical aspect for organizations, as innovation must be a continual endeavor. It entails recognizing opportunities for improvement in both products and processes and implementing changes to maintain competitiveness. This may encompass technology innovations, enhanced product functionalities, or wholly original solutions to current issues. Nevertheless, we should highlight the importance of adaptation to market dynamics, as markets are fluid, and strategies effective today may become obsolete tomorrow. Remaining cognizant of market fluctuations and nascent trends is crucial. Organizations must rapidly adapt to capitalize on emerging opportunities and mitigate potential risks (Gouveia et al., 2024).

When discussing client-focused strategy, we emphasize effective innovation frequently prioritizes the client. Comprehending customer requirements and inclinations is essential for developing products or services that appeal to the target demographic. Consistent client feedback and interaction can inform the innovation process (Pinarbasi et al., 2024). However, there is another significant aspect that requires our

attention, the process of establishing distinct value, as differentiation involves distinguishing oneself from competitors. By using innovation, organizations can develop distinctive value propositions that enhance the attractiveness of their services to consumers. This may entail exceptional quality, unique attributes, or an unparalleled client experience (Sheth, 2020).

Despite the importance of the aforementioned criteria, we must not overlook the importance of sustainability, as innovation encompasses not just immediate enhancements but also fosters enduring sustainability. Enterprises that prioritize sustainability in their innovations can lower expenses, appeal to environmentally sensitive consumers, and positively impact the environment, therefore augmenting their value creation initiatives (Hristov et al., 2019). Additionally, we cannot neglect the importance of market leadership, due to the fact that ongoing innovation and distinction can establish a business as a leader within its sector. Leading change can create new income opportunities and enhance a company's reputation as an industry innovator (Abubakar et al., 2024).

In the process of value creation, organizations orient their focus to the gratification process to be able to evaluate possible strategic performance related to the implemented technological changes or newly adapted digital strategies (Eriksson et al., 2024). This matter questions the importance of the temporal aspect of gratification and values the impact followed by an adopted technology or digital strategy on the evolution of an organization.

Methodology

As previously mentioned, this paper aims to investigate the concept of atemporality in the gratification process by analyzing the existing theoretical framework of the gratification paradigm, initially established by Mischel and Ebbesen (1970). It seeks to evaluate the ability for self-regulation and the voluntary deferral of gratification, as well as to examine its potential connections to the value creation processes within an organization. While the gratification process is typically associated with individual behavior, it can also apply to organizational decision-making (Sousa et al., 2019). The study employs phenomenological research through 15 in-depth interviews to thoroughly examine the perspectives on atemporal gratification and to determine the patterns of digital meta-value generation for firms of digital marketing experts, that have over 8 year of experience in the domain, are start-up co-founders, marketing directors, freelancers with a wide expertise generated by working with organizations from various domains, but only in the context of organizations that own or create digital tools for their consumers.

The choice for phenomenological research comes from the research need of a qualitative methodology that concentrates on examining and articulating individuals' lived experiences concerning the aspect of atemporal gratification and its role in creating digital meta-value within organizations. This qualitative research method seeks to elucidate the substance of these events by analyzing participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations. Grounded in philosophy, phenomenological research design aims to eliminate prejudices and biases to achieve a profound understanding of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of individuals who have personally experienced it

qualitatively. Phenomenological research design is a qualitative methodology that emphasizes the exploration and description of individuals' living experiences related to a certain phenomenon. This qualitative research method seeks to elucidate the substance of these events by analyzing participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations. Grounded in philosophy, phenomenological research design aims to eliminate prejudices and biases to achieve a profound understanding of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of individuals who have personally experienced it qualitatively (Groenewald, 2004).

This study refers to value creation as the significance of technological instruments in the digital adaptation processes and strategic execution within the marketing sector for organizations. It might not bring the atemporal aspect of gratification as a theoretical concept into the domain. Still, it explores the idea of atemporality in the context of the organizational gratification process and investigates the process of "meta-value" creation, not existing as a theoretical concept in the current academic context, but is defined by a potential amplified value of a technological advancement or digital innovation of an already established value for this particular technological advancement or digital innovation.

As the theoretical background shows, there is a link between the process of value creation and gratification. Moreover, it offers us an academic space to explore the causal relationship between digital performance and the delay of gratification. However, the digital disruption that is faced today by organizations offers multiple possibilities for technological adaptation, which might impact the value creation process, as it needs a strategical approach and meeting internal organizational needs, meanwhile the gratification process is directly linked to a transactional activity between investment and reward, which cannot be present without the existence of a product and an organization's desire to create a product or a tool that generates the foundation for this specific transactional engagement.

To conduct 15 in-depth interviews, the questions in the interview guide have the objective of responding to the following research questions:

RQ1. How does your organization approach the idea of adopting technological advancement or digital innovation in the context of digital disruption?

RQ2. In what way does the value creation process within the organization impact its gratification process?

RQ3. What is your company's vision regarding the amplification of an already created value of a digital advancement among competition, and does your organization act towards uplifting this value through a new way of implementation and use?

Results and discussion

The 15 in-depth interviews conducted offered multiple insights regarding the value creation process within the organization, but most importantly upon atemporal gratification and identification of digital meta-value creation patterns for organizations.

RQ1. How does your organization approach the idea of adopting technological advancement or digital innovation in the context of digital disruption?

9 respondents out of 15 confirmed that their organizations implemented technological advancements not according to their own company values but as demand coming from the market development and the competition's advancement on the same digital aspect, as their need for maintaining consumers' interest in their products and raising brand awareness is prioritized over slow growth, or delayed gratification. Whilst six respondents out of 15 stated that their organizations pay attention to their organizational needs in the first place and prioritize the alignment of the organization's needs and values over technological advancement, even if it means the lack of an increase in sales or a drop of sales for a determined amount of time. When discussing digital advancement, all 15 answers focused on the desire to develop state-of-the-art digital technology, but only in the realm of wishful thinking rather than a realistic scenario. Experts are explaining it by the desire to adopt new technologies and develop new digital strategies, but this process usually impacts adaptation gaps created by the speed of adaptation of the latest technology by consumers, its adoption by their consumers, and the implementation gap created because of the two previously mentioned ones.

11 respondents out of 15 confirm that their competition is one of the most impactful motivators for the digital advancement of their organization, but, more importantly, they look up to state-of-the-art technology brands like Apple, Tesla, or Amazon that represent the pinnacle of organizational growth from their perspective. Meanwhile only 4 out of 15 are guided by the idea of following advancement by their own pace, and even if the market presents digital advancements it does not necessarily represent an upcoming digital growth for their organization as they still feel that they need to feel in the gaps of previous markets technological advancements to be able to implement and be up to date with today's advancements.

RQ2. In what way does the value creation process within the organization impact its gratification process?

The gratification process is perceived differently across organizations. 8 out of 15 respondents, especially when implementing digital strategies, expect instant gratification because their users/consumers react immediately, and they can track progress right from the start. 5 out of 15 respondents usually opt for delayed gratification and observe it more often as they typically have long-term goals when it comes to app development and future possible evolution of digital strategies, not because instant gratification is not so valuable for them, but mostly because delayed gratification brings them more revenue. Only 2 experts out of 15, who also have experience in both start-ups and international corporate organizations, talked about the technological investments they have made with no current revenue, and they cannot associate a gratification process with those decisions. Still, they observe possible future impacts upon these advancements and insight that might offer future technological advancement. One of the examples would come from the proposal of in-app modifications and working on them without a guarantee of international approval or possible future implementation.

Each of the respondents mentioned that when we introduce in the discussion organizations whose activity is directly related to technological advancements, the customers' experience has a significant impact on future developments. All the experts highlighted the importance of data tracking as an efficient catalyst and a strategic insights generator. The customers' feedback offers a perspective on organizational and consumers' needs and helps create a synergy between them to increase the organization's notoriety on the market or grow its revenue. Meanwhile, 12 out of 15 respondents mentioned that the feedback implementation process is the most demanding, as it directly depends on employees' digital adaptability and their capacity to solve the problems identified by customers. By their observation there is an adaptation gap that makes this process more difficult, which is formed when organization adapt to new technologies slower that their employees, which usually generates lack of gratification among employees when there proposed strategies must be postponed or cannot be implemented by organizations because organizations are one step back the global digital market advancement, and even though they receive the feedback from their consumers. They have solution-oriented teams, the implementation does not happen.

RQ3. What is your company's vision regarding the amplification of an already created value of a digital advancement among competition, and does your organization act towards uplifting this value through a new way of implementation and use?

As previously mentioned, selected experts work for start-ups, international corporate organizations, and tech companies; most have gained diverse experience, which makes their input more valuable to this paper. By previously analyzing answers and their answers on the questions regarding the current research question, all the experts mention a combination of consumers' feedback and digital competition advancements for establishing their technological relevance. 6 out of 15 experts additionally highlighted that they observe a difference between the technological relevance of the tools and products they use or create and the organizational relevance of those tools. They associate technological relevance with an important milestone from their company's digital maturity level, but not all the time this technological relevance is associated with organizational relevance, as some of their products, even though are valuable for the tech industry, are not that valuable for the brand as they might not always completely align with brands values, so some experts even though notice the importance of technological relevance, hesitate on its implementation because of the internal reasons related to organization's values or their internal level of adaptability to the digital advancement.

10 of 15 experts noted that market-established value can rarely be uplifted; the possibility arises only with sufficient financial resources invested in research and teams. 5 experts out of 15 underline that they had the opportunity to enhance the value of an existing technological advancement and confer it a "meta-value". For example, one of the experts was once a creator of a dating application that used tracking and showed their users the places they could observe or meet the person they liked. If that particular person was a user of this application, they could get in touch if they did not have this opportunity when they first met face to face. Along with COVID-19, this tool could serve as a tracking system for infected patients and help them identify the day, place, and time where they could have been infected by the virus. This

perspective shows us that there is a possibility for organizations to find value above the established market value for some digital tools or technological advancements and keep both values valid, whilst satisfying multiple social/customers'/users' needs.

Conclusions

This paper's exploration upon atemporal gratification and its role in creating digital meta-value within organizations has shown that organizations are focused on the process of value creation among their products and tools in the context of digital disruption. Both internal and external inputs define this value creation process. Internal inputs are associated with the adaptation capacity of employees and the implementation capacity of the organization to technological advancements and digital innovation, whilst external inputs are defined by consumers' feedback and market advancements upon digitalization and technological development. Moreover, the process of value creation is related to the process of gratification that can have various types of temporalities. Some of the implemented technological updates for an organization's tools or products might have atemporal gratification, but teams will still work on their implementation as the process of their creation is more valuable than an instant or delayed gratification because it might bring new insights for the organization without reaching a goal or returning revenue. This aspect of atemporality offers academic space for exploring the possible uplift of an existing product value by providing a "meta-value" for digital products and tools, while also preserving the initial value for its original purpose. This study may not be sufficient to integrate the concept of "atemporal gratification" into marketing. Yet, it serves as an initial step toward exploring the potential to analyze gratification beyond existing theoretical and practical frameworks, offering a novel perspective on the value-creation process in the digitally disrupted environment confronting organizations.

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