

COMMENTARY

Why staying happy means staying busy

By Adelle Yang

WHY do investors trade stocks? Why do scientists make discoveries? Why do gangsters fight turf wars?

There are many reasons or motivations for engaging in activity. We may do something to make money, to accrue fame, to improve society, to protect territory, to become fitter or slimmer, or for a myriad of other reasons with varying degrees of impact or worth.

My colleagues and I at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School conduct research on consumer behaviour and psychology, such as the judgement processes underlying their purchasing decisions. Why do we do this? In part, it is to advance knowledge and develop our understanding of the world of marketing. But is there a deeper, more fundamental reason?

In a study with colleagues at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and Shanghai Jiaotong University, we looked at why people pursue activity and seek to be busy. What we found suggests that people commonly experience two conflicting feelings: they dread idleness, but they also want a justification to be active – not just to be busy for the sake of being busy. Indeed, without a reason for doing something, people will choose to stay idle. Yet, even if the reason for activity is specious or plainly pointless, people are happier being busy doing something than being idle.

We can see examples of this in daily life. Some airports, for instance, have experimented with this phenomenon to make arriving passengers happier – or at least less miserable – by mak-

ing the walk from the gate to the baggage reclaim longer than it necessarily needs to be. This keeps passengers occupied and reduces idle time standing watching an empty baggage belt.

To test these competing desires for idleness and busyness in an experiment, we recruited volunteers to fill out a series of surveys. After the first survey, they were told they had to wait 15 minutes before starting the next one, during which time they could either submit the completed survey to an office nearby or drop it off at a more distant location. For either option, they would receive a chocolate reward. Choosing the more distant option would involve a walk that would keep them busy for the 15 minutes, whereas if they chose the nearer option, they would then have to wait for the remainder of the time doing nothing.

Those who chose to occupy themselves by walking to the more distant office were found to be happier than those who chose to wait it out doing nothing. More interestingly, we found that if the chocolates offered were the same at both locations, the volunteers were more likely to choose to stay idle. However, if the chocolates were different, more volunteers chose the distant location because they could justify the activity.

Later, we repeated the experiment in a different context. Volunteers were given a bracelet and told they had 15 minutes to either disassemble it and put it back together or to do nothing at all. Some volunteers were told that if they chose the disassembly option, they would have to put it back together in the original design.

Others were told that they would have to reassemble it in a different design.

Our results showed that those told they would have to reassemble in the original design chose to do nothing, while most of the group told to reassemble it in a different way chose to stay busy. Again, we found that those who chose to be active reported greater happiness, and that volunteers were more likely to reassemble the bracelet when it would result in a different look than when it would result in the original look – the difference in the designs made the activity more justifiable.

AVOIDING IDLENESS

This is because, as rational animals, humans seek to base their decisions on reasons and are averse to wasting resources – be it their time or their energy. These observations could be rooted in evolution because throughout the ages, expending energy without reason could jeopardise survival. For that reason, while we know that busyness delivers happiness, we also see it as silly to exert effort without justification or purpose.

However, busyness can be either constructive or destructive. History has shown that idle people often engage in destructive busyness, from crime to full-blown cross-border wars, demonstrating the oft-repeated saying “the devil makes work for idle hands”.

A sound understanding of idleness and busyness is particularly relevant as we look to a future where technology and automation will be taking over many jobs and freeing up more of our time. In recent human history, when pro-

ductivity was low, people had to work hard to survive and idleness was a luxury for the rich.

Today, modernisation has elongated lifespans, freed many from devoting most of their efforts towards survival and increased freedom over the discretionary use of time. Yet, as technologies advance further, more of us will be somewhat substituted by robots and artificial intelligence. The day that most of us will not have to work is approaching.

Nonetheless, the eternal search for a productive and purposeful life will not cease. With progressively less need to work, how can people use their abundance of time purposefully? By engaging in sports and games, self-development, scientific research, hobbies, or in destructive behaviours? As we progress, we must understand that the relative affluence of time does not guarantee the ultimate freedom of human existence, but rather escalates the need for purposeful busyness.

People often say they work hard so that they can be idle. Our research and increasing empirical evidence suggest an alternative interpretation – perhaps we work hard in part to avoid being idle. In idleness, time breeds misery. In busyness, time generates happiness, as long as it is used towards a purpose, even a feebly justifiable one.

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