

The lifestyle news network

Trends that innovate and inspire



Lucid Stead installation by Phillip K Smith III, California

The Polarity Paradox

Moderation is no longer the modus operandi. In busy, networked and choice-rich lives, people are finding a new model for self-restraint by abandoning the middle ground and living in temporary extremes. Abstinence and indulgence, shopping and saving, fasting and gorging are the new lifestyle patterns that are enabling consumers to have all and nothing in The Polarity Paradox.

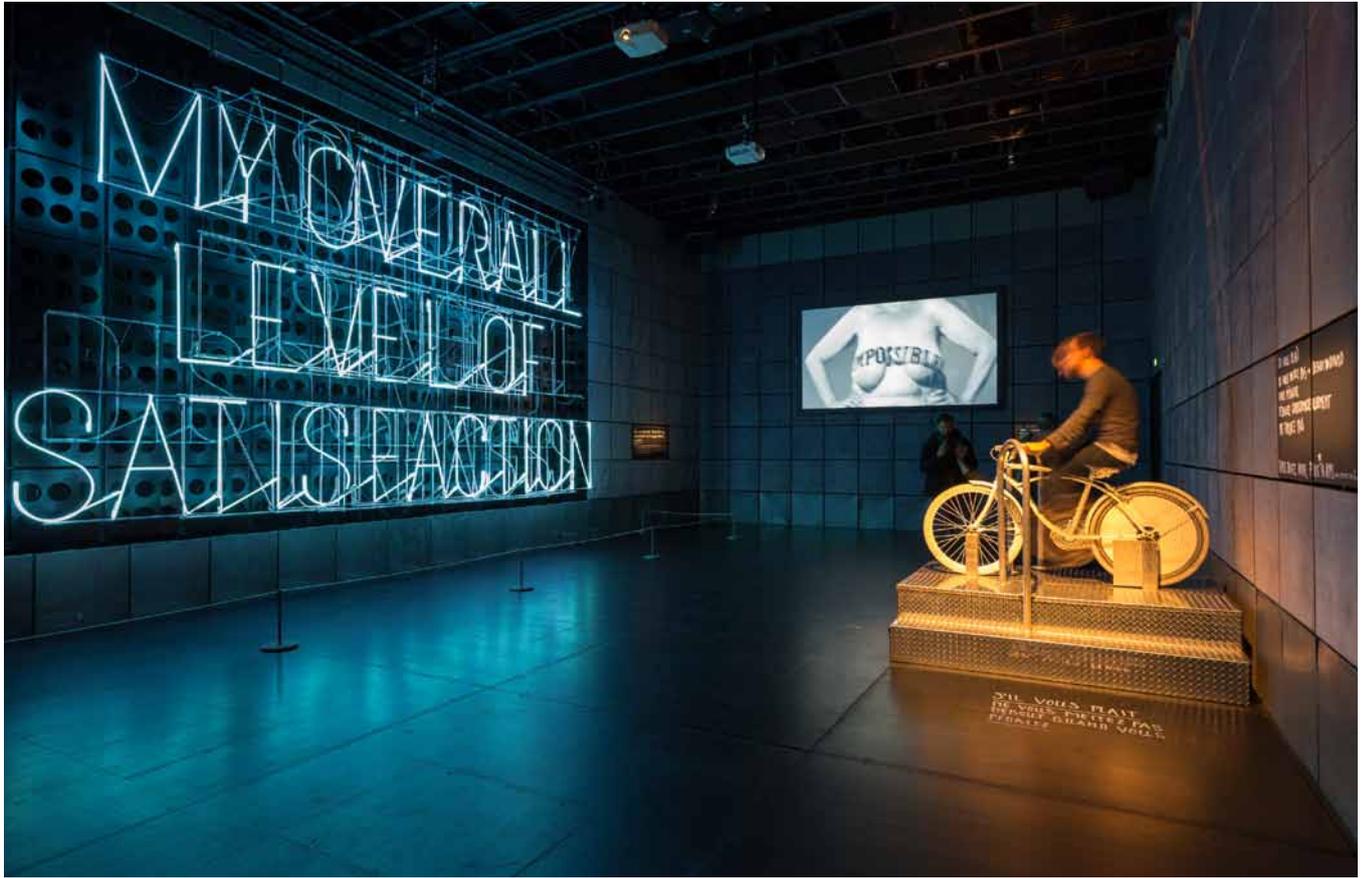
‘Polarisation is growing from the desire for a longer timespan. This is affecting our consumption patterns and political opinions.’

Dr Stephan Sigrist, head of Zurich-based think tank WIRE



We are living in an era that is categorised by paradox. Pop culture is flooded with visions of heaven and hell, beauty experts are turning towards alchemy or science, and business leaders are placing faith in algorithms or astrology. Amid all this confusion, consumers are adopting contradiction as the sanest lifestyle choice – that is, the most rewarding, invigorating and self-actualising.

‘This polarisation is a tendency that we have observed for a long time, and is gaining relevance not only towards our consumption patterns but significantly in political opinion,’ says Dr Stephan Sigrist, head of Zurich-based think tank WIRE. ‘We are struggling with rising complexity and wishing for understandable or simple reasons in order to still understand the world around us.’



Opposite page : Momentum by United Visual Artists, The Curve Gallery, The Barbican, London

This page : The Happy Show exhibition by Stefan Sagmeister, La Gaîté Lyrique, Paris

Drivers

Austerity Acceptance

Consumers are accepting that austerity is an enduring reality rather than a blip.

Just 8.7% of UK households said their financial situation improved in January 2014, while a quarter said it worsened, according to YouGov. In the EU, unemployment remains widespread and cutting consumers' disposable income drastically. More than 26m people are unemployed in the Eurozone, and the number of people out of work for longer than a year stands at 11m, according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Have-it-all, Do-it-all lives

People are leading lifestyles with a greater variety of choice in a reduced amount of time, and increasingly we want to have it all and do it all. Consumers are living in extremes as denser lives make us want to experience things more thoroughly and intensely.

We are packing in more sport, culture and leisure activities. Visits to art galleries and museums increased in 2013. The British Museum welcomed a record 6.7m visitors, the number of visitors to the Dali Museums in Spain increased by 8.42% and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam had more than 1.4m visitors in 2013. Gym memberships increased by 8% between 2012 and 2013, according to ClubManager.

Amid this rise in culture and sport, we are also working harder. In the UK, 53% of all workers say they have to do the work of more than one person, and the average UK employee has to do the job of 1.4 people, or the equivalent of a seven-day working week, according to Randstad.



Millennialism

After reaching maturity during a period of uncertainty at the start of the decade, Millennials are subject to a set of extreme circumstances that are giving rise to equally extreme behaviour.

Marie Stafford, planning and foresight director at JWT, notes the contrasting elements that Millennials are subject to: 'They have high expectations. In spite of a tough economic environment, they are super-connected but introspective. They are confident yet anxious,' she says. 'They are paradoxically anxious and concerned about the face they present to the world.'

Digiphrenia

Forced into living split personalities online, consumers are suffering an identity crisis. This is causing a kickback where they are seeking to re-assert themselves, or opt out of owning an identity altogether. It's easy to see how digiphrenia is taking hold- people currently manage on average 3.1 email addresses, up from 2.6 last year, according to MyLife, 42% of people use multiple social networking accounts, and the figure increases to 61% within the bracket of people aged 18-34.

'Identity has become confused,' says Daljit Singh, Berlin-based creative business strategist and curator. 'Because there are so many different things that you can describe yourself as, and now you can have a digital and physical persona, I imagine there are people out there who are living totally separate lives. It's become easier to live a lie behind a pixelated wall- a wall that can be easily knocked down.'



Impacts

All and Nothing

The way that we shop, eat, consume media, and manage our finances and family time is shifting from an all-things-in-moderation approach to more extreme behaviour in which consumers alternate between all and nothing.

'This way of living is taking hold because we feel overwhelmed by the amount of choice and sheer content that is out there,' says Emma Cook, author of *5:2 Your Life: How the Revolutionary 5:2 Approach can Transform Your Health, Your Wealth and Your Happiness*. 'People talk about detoxes and retreats, but this is a form of doing that within your daily and weekly living. It enables us to have it both ways – and that is a tempting proposition.'

Sensitive Brands

In this world of binging and purging, brands are helping people to deal with extreme environments, by acting as friends and nudging them into making better choices.

Sensitive brands are developing new solutions that are enabling consumers to indulge in extremes without fear of repercussions. A new service aimed at young professionals is curing hangovers. The IV Doctor delivers an IV drip to anyone suffering from over-indulgence and re-invigorates them, allowing them to perform at work the following day.

Pleasure/pain

People no longer simply want to be happy, they want to be challenged, frustrated, and experience a depth of feeling that adds a definition to their happiness. As a result they are seeking extremes to make them feel alive and fulfilled.

'Transient, negative emotions are important and functional in their adaptive value,' says Sonja Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology and author of *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. 'Negative emotions serve as a contrast to the positive ones. You can't know what happiness is if you have never known unhappiness. Now there is a greater understanding of this, as we focus more on our emotional lives.'

Scare-marketing

Campaigns and commercials are taking people on a journey first through anxiety, then to a sense of relief.

The most recent and pronounced example of a scare-marketing campaign is Unilever's film short, *Why Bring a Child into This World?* Several expecting couples are shown a short film that attests to the violence, war and natural disasters that grip the planet, forcing them to question their motives for having a child.

After the upsetting scenes have been shown, the film turns optimistic and an unseen narrator promises that 'illnesses that today affect millions of children a year will be prevented by simple, everyday products'.

Opposite page : Gyakusou spring/summer 2014 Convertible Sweat Map Jacket by Nike; Men's Lunar Speed Axl by Nike

This page : Video still from Own the Weekend campaign by The Guardian



Consequences

Brand Extremists

As consumers continue to have a love-hate relationship with products and services, brands are learning that their zealots are prime candidates to spread their messages, and teach brands valuable lessons about themselves.

Brian Millar, director of strategy at Sense Worldwide, believes in the power of these new brand extremists. 'Although extreme consumers are a minority, successful businesses can be built on them, as their attitudes can become mainstream in only a few years. Think graphic designers and Apple products, or clubbers and Red Bull,' he says.

Turbulent tourism

Increasingly, people want to equate themselves with upsetting, strife-ridden scenarios in order to grasp what is happening in new horizons. We call this behaviour Turbulent Tourism.

A new travel website called Jungles in Paris offers a Monocle-influenced editorial that shows destinations of interest to turbulent tourists. The site shows places where you can travel to see dwindling natural species, toe-curling tribal rituals, and deserts that used to be lakes. The emphasis on each experience tends towards the extreme.

Disturbia dining

The pleasure/pain principle unpacked in the Impacts section of this report is carrying to live events where people are not seeking to be simply delighted, but tested, teased, distressed and even disgusted.

Wolvesmouth is a pop up dining event that carries this premise out to the letter. The plating of the food is designed to put the diner on edge, and question what it is that they are eating. The dishes often are splattered with red jus that is purposefully meant to look like blood, while the meat is cut roughly so that it looks as though it has been ravaged by an animal.

Frustration Gaming

A nihilistic and counter-intuitive movement in gaming is emerging, which abandons the reward aspect that has driven humans to play games for millennia.

Waiting in Line 3D uses frustration as its core appeal. The premise is to stay awake in a queue by punching yourself in the face using the space bar. An energy meter at the bottom of the screen drains down as your character drifts off to sleep, while each punch depletes your health percentage. It is impossible to either win or score points.

This page : Wolvesmouth



Futures

Time Shifts

The way that time is traditionally divided into minutes, hours, days and years will be supplemented by technology that calculates how much time you have on the planet. Tikker is a watch that counts down the years, months and days that you have left to live. Although it sounds like a morbid preoccupation, the premise of Tikker is to remind users to slow down, enjoy life and make the most of the time they have.

Extreme self-awareness

Within The Polarity Paradox an undercurrent of anxiety is causing us to live actively rather than passively. At the same time, a heightened sense of our own mortality is ushering in a period of extreme self-awareness in which people are yearning for an amplified sense of presence.

A range of new products and services support this quest for extreme self-awareness. The Tikker watch calculates the time you have left on earth and counts down the years, months and days you have left to live. Although it sounds like a morbid preoccupation, the premise of Tikker is to remind users to slow down, enjoy life and make the most of the time we have left.

Golden Mean

As extreme lives eventually leave people tired and frayed at the edges, our lifestyles will progress towards an optimum state of moderation. As we reach this life state, new technologies, services and products will enable us to find the Golden Mean.

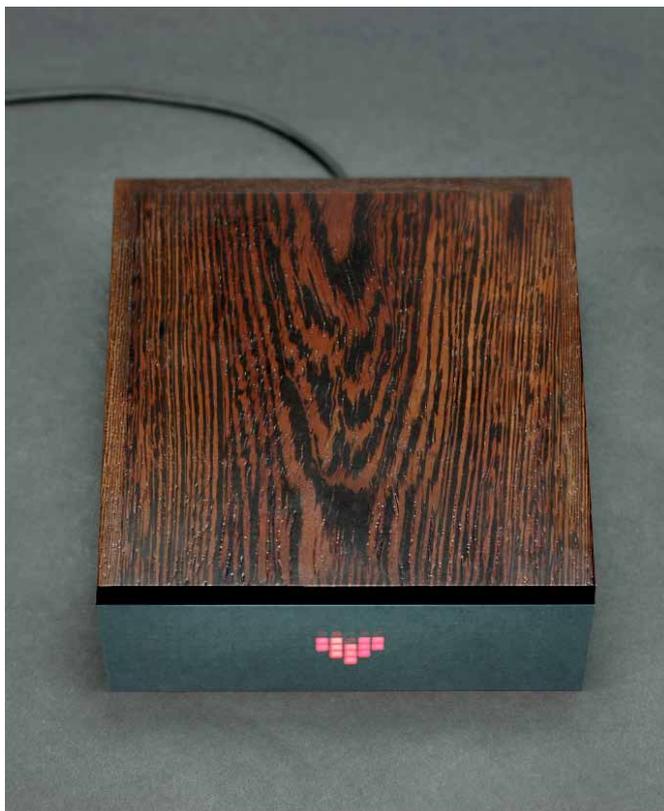
At this point, brands will be able to sell to more people with fewer product categories. 'There will be a blockbuster attitude in companies, in which brands try to make a few products cater for everybody,' says Sense Worldwide's Brian Millar. 'This 'fat head' is much more profitable than the 'long tail' of niche goods.'

What this means to your brand

The Polarity Paradox is a coping mechanism for recession-beaten consumers who are over-sensitised, confused and disillusioned. By adopting extreme diets, extreme work patterns and extreme products people are re-appropriating meaningfulness in their lives. This trend is largely about definition, and finding the touchpoints between dark and light, euphoria and sorrow, abstinence and indulgence, shopping and saving, and luxury and frugality. Brands that can guide consumers through these extreme states will create memorable experiences and win new fans.

There is as much to benefit from alleviating the fall-out from extreme lifestyles as there is in facilitating them. Whether your brand is a facilitator or an alleviator, you must think laterally about how to tap into the potential of extreme consumers and monetise the shifts afoot in The Polarity Paradox.

This page : ALARMclock by Fig; Tikker watch by Rebecca DeRosa



Toolkit

Moderation is no longer the modus operandi for recession-beaten consumers. A new life model is emerging as people flee the middle ground and live in temporary extremes. Use these tools to tap into The Polarity Paradox mindset.

1 *Engage austerity accepters*

As the downturn kicks on, people are becoming bored.

2 *Enable all and nothing*

Extremes are the new moderation model technology that delivers results.

3 *Be sensitive*

Provide a service that helps people negotiate the Polarity Paradox.

4 *Use scare marketing*

This approach provokes a strong cognitive reaction in consumers.

5 *Be a frustration gamer*

Harness the intensity of this new genre to convey your message.

6 *Do disturbia dining*

Food lovers want to be unnerved and then delighted.

7 *Enlist brand extremists*

The Polarity Paradox has spawned a new level of fandom.

8 *Play with utopia and dystopia*

These images are imprinted in the minds of consumers.

9 *Balance pleasure and pain*

Powerful experiences can be built by slipping between the two.

10 *Run a turbulent tour*

People want to equate themselves with light and dark.

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