

Utilitarianism And Hedonism: A Qualitative Study on the Dominance of Hedonism in Digital Food Communication

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative investigation examines how hedonism overpowers utilitarianism in digital food communication based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) as a lens. Targeting YouTube food videos in Tamil Nadu, the research compares 500 viewer comments in 10 picked videos, five with utilitarian content and five with hedonistic content. The results show that although utilitarian content serves functional purposes like information-seeking and health awareness, hedonistic content provokes greater emotional arousal, visual pleasure, and social interaction. Hedonistic videos not only garnered more views and likes but also drew emotionally expressive and affectively motivated comments. The analysis illustrates a strong bias towards enjoyable, visually appealing, and emotionally engaging food content, emphasizing the increasing power of hedonic satisfaction in digital food media. This research contributes to further insight into changing audience behaviour in digital food culture and offers insights for content producers and communicators seeking to engage with modern audiences.

Keywords: Digital food Communication, Visual pleasure, Food media culture, Hedonic consumption

Introduction

Food is a basic necessity for human beings and essential for survival. It has evolved into a symbolic experience that is deeply interconnected with social interaction, culture, and aesthetics. The way people experience, discuss, and consume food has changed dramatically due to the rise of digital platforms. Social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram have transformed food into a communicative tool, where users engage with content not only to learn recipes or evaluate nutritional value but to experience pleasure, express aesthetic appreciation, and connect emotionally (Abbar et al., 2015; Choe et al., 2017). The emergence of digital food culture is a reflection of the increasing convergence of hedonistic motives such as pleasure, indulgence, and emotional fulfillment, with the utilitarian features of food such as nutrition, price, and convenience.

The categories of utilitarianism and hedonistic posts on digital media platforms like YouTube and Instagram can easily attract young minds. To keep the study focused, the researcher used YouTube as the primary platform. Utilitarianism, as a philosophical doctrine, primarily focuses on actions and decisions that maximize utility, often interpreted as promoting the greatest good for the greatest number (Mill, 1863). In the context of digital food communication, utilitarianism presents itself through content and interactions that emphasize food's practical benefits, such as nutritional value, convenience, affordability, and usability. Food content in digital media that emphasizes health advantages, cooking tutorials, low-cost recipes, and quick meals is consistent with utilitarian principles. Users who interact with this type of content are frequently goal-oriented, seeking solutions to specific needs such as time-saving cooking methods or dietary advice.

For example, recipe reels or instructional YouTube videos on "5-minute breakfast ideas" serve the practical function of meeting daily dietary requirements efficiently, showcasing utilitarian content (Segev et al., 2015). According to Lu and Hsiao (2010), digital users who seek out health-related food content are motivated by instrumental needs, aligning closely with utilitarian goals rather than hedonic gratification. As Kim and

Geistfeld (2007) highlight, consumers often evaluate food choices based on their cost-benefit ratio, and digital media that supports such evaluations appeals directly to utilitarian logic.

Hedonism in digital food communication often manifests through visual stimuli, sensory language, and expressive presentations, which evoke desire, nostalgia, and sensory gratification (Yoon & Chung, 2018). It projects the user's tendency to get joy and decadence through visually rich and emotionally arousing content. According to Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), hedonism in consumption is characterized by "an affective, sensory, and symbolic orientation" toward products, highlighting pleasure and fantasy over function. The popularity of "food porn," where food is stylized to maximize its visual appeal, exemplifies how digital content emphasizes the hedonic experience over the practical purpose of food (Spence et al., 2016). At the same time, utilitarian food content such as healthy meal prep videos, cost-effective recipes, or convenience food hacks caters to rational decision-making and practical value (Kim et al., 2020). Thus, the digital food communication becomes the place of pleasurable engagement, where users create and consume content not for information alone, but for sensory stimulation and emotional resonance. In the era of digital food communication, utilitarian values continue to play an important but often subtle role. While hedonic content may have more visual and emotional appeal, utilitarian material serves as the functional backbone for consumers looking for advice, health, expense, and sustainability in their food choices. Understanding the balance is vital for mapping the various gratifications that users obtain from digital food platforms.

The rise of digital food communication has resulted in a change in how consumers interact with food information, with motivations stretching from practical and utilitarian need to emotional and sensory satisfaction. The difference in user interaction with food information emphasizes the numerous ways in which food communication serves both practical and hedonistic aims. While utilitarian content offers practical benefits such as health information or time-saving recipes, hedonistic content captivates through sensory appeal, emotional connection, and enjoyment.

To further investigate these dynamics, this study will use the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to better understand how digital food communication satisfies certain psychological and social needs. UGT claims that audiences actively seek content that meets their cognitive, affective, personal, social, and tension-relieving requirements, and this framework will allow for a more in-depth examination of how users interact with food content to attain both utilitarian and hedonic gratifications. In the following section, the study will look at the theoretical foundations of this approach, namely how utilitarian and hedonistic motives connect with the key needs, defined in UGT, and how these aspects influence digital food communication.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

In this study, the researcher applied Uses and Gratification Theory which suggests that media audiences are not passive recipients but active seekers of content that fulfills specific psychological and social needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). One of the most important aspects of this study was figuring out how users engage food communication to satisfy their needs, specifically, cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension-free requirements. As UGT theory suggests, the needs categorizations are as follows,

1. Cognitive needs: Information seeking, learning recipes, understanding food culture.
2. Affective needs: Emotional gratification, visual pleasure, sensory engagement.
3. Personal integrative needs: Self-enhancement, personal identity, confidence.
4. Social integrative need s: Social connection, shared experiences, community bonding.
5. Tension-release needs: Escapism, relaxation, entertainment.

For further refinement, the researcher analyses the comments of the selected food communication posts under the two broad philosophical constructs known as Utilitarianism and Hedonism will give a deeper understanding of the dominant motivations in digital media food communication. Utilitarian motivations reflect practical and functional engagements, such as searching for recipes or nutrition advice—aligned with cognitive and some personal integrative needs (Stafford & Stafford, 2001). Hedonic motivations involve affective, emotional, and sensory experiences, such as watching aesthetically pleasing food videos or emotionally evocative narratives—corresponding with affective, social integrative, and tension-release gratifications (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The researcher examines user comments on specific food communication posts to see which UGT suggested needs are expressed and if they reflect utilitarian or hedonistic gratifications. For example: Comments such as "saving this recipe for dinner tonight" are utilitarian and Comments include "This video is so satisfying to watch!" Reflect hedonic attraction.

Thus, the researcher draws the conceptual framework for this present study as follows,



Fig 1: Conceptual framework

The figure depicts how digital food content on YouTube satisfies the gratifications specified by Uses and Gratifications Theory, which are divided into utilitarian and hedonistic formats that influence user behavioural responses such as saving, sharing, commenting, or emotionally connecting with the content.

Hypothesis

Based on the conceptual understanding, the study proposes the following Hypothesis. This study posits that people interact with digital food content mostly for hedonistic reasons, such as pleasure, enjoyment, and emotional connection, rather than utilitarian or informational ones. While utilitarian content, such as recipes or health tips, fulfills users' demand for useful knowledge, hedonistic material, which is rich in visuals and sensory appeal, more strongly attracts users by satisfying their emotional and entertainment requirements. It is predicted that user comments and interactions will reflect this preference, demonstrating the dominance of hedonic motivations in digital food communication.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to evaluate how users interact with digital food content via the two different lenses of utilitarianism and hedonism, with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) serving as its fundamental framework. The goal is to better understand the psychological and social gratifications that viewers seek from food-related content on digital platforms, particularly YouTube in Tamilnadu.

Selection of Videos for Analysis

A purposive sampling technique, ensuring a balanced representation of utilitarian and hedonistic content was used to select 10 YouTube food videos popular among Tamil Nadu audiences, with 5 videos indicating utilitarian content such as health tips, easy recipes, and budget-friendly meals and 5 representing hedonistic content such as visually rich food vlogs, ASMR, Food Porn, indulgent eating experiences. The choices for each category were made based on viewer engagement and thematic clarity. The first 50 comments from each video, a total of 500 comments, were chosen for this study in order to look at dominance of hedonism over utilitarianism. The tool ExportComments.com, which allows for the mass download of public YouTube comments in an organized format, was used to extract the comments.

Afterwards, the comments were manually categorized according to thematic relevance to hedonistic or utilitarian gratifications. Further classified into cognitive, emotional, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension-release, the five satisfaction demands are identified by UGT. In order to document the emotional tone of user responses, each comment is manually subjected to sentiment analysis and classified as either positive, neutral, or negative. The table below summarizes the key attributes of each video

S.No	Video Title	Content Style	Category	Durati on	Total Views	Total likes	Total Comments
1	Easy High-Protein Breakfast Recipe	Instructional, Health-Focused	Utilitarian	11mins	647k	27k	1180
2	6 Instant South Indian Breakfast Recipes Quick & Easy Healthy Breakfast Recipe Ideas	Quick Meals, Instructional	Utilitarian	17.24 mins	2.9M	14k	326
3	Lunch menu for 50 rs vlog Budget cooking/lunch menu in tamil	Health-Focused, budget cooking	Utilitarian	8:11 mins	86k	2.2k	944
4	Simple Healthy Breakfast With Good Protein	Quick Meals, Instructional	Utilitarian	10.08m ins	513k	3.5k	187

5	Afterschool Kids Snack Recipes in Tamil Healthy Evening Snacks Recipes in Tamil	Meal prep, Health-Focused	Utilitarian	8.34 mins	1.3M	22k	1381
6	ASMR poori with spicy chicken curry chicken leg piece mukbang eating show	Food vlog, Indulgent, ASMR	Hedonistic	12.21 mins	546k	5.2k	168
7	Ooty Food Tour 🍲❤️ Roadu kadai taste ultimate 😊 spicy momos 🥟 Tamil	Emotional, Sensory	Hedonistic	8:30 mins	58k	537	219
8	50 Parotta & Chicken Gravy(Leg Piece) Eating Challenge Parotta Pandey vs Saapattu Raman	Quick, Visual Appeal, Eating challenge	Hedonistic	10 min	10M	130K	3928
9	BIRYANI MUTTON LEG BIRYANI Mutton Chops Mutton Leg Piece Biryani	ASMR-like, Indulgent	Hedonistic	11.01 mins	50M	628K	13795
10	கண்டுபிடிச்சிட்டேன் !! I Found The Best MIDNIGHT BIRIYANI in Chennai 🍲 Foodie Prabu	Indulgent, Emotional	Hedonistic	10:00 mins	391K	6.1K	218

Table 1: Key attributes of the selected videos

The comparison of these ten YouTube videos reveals that individuals prefer to watch entertaining, physically appealing, and emotionally engaging food content (hedonistic) over practical, educational cookery videos (utilitarian). While utilitarian videos, such as healthy recipes or budget meals, earned a reasonable number of views and comments, hedonistic videos, such as biryani eating challenges or midnight food explorations, received significantly more views, likes, and comments. For example, a biryani video received 50 million views, far exceeding any of the healthy recipe videos. This implies that viewers are more attracted to amusing and visually appealing food material, confirming the notion that digital food communication is motivated by pleasures, enjoyment and emotional connection rather than utilitarian purpose.

Comment and Sentiment analysis

To examine the comments on each video, the first 50 comments were extracted, coded, and analysed using gratification types, motivations, and sentiments. Cognitive Needs comments are about obtaining information (for example, "Can we use almond butter instead of peanut butter?"). Affective Needs comments express emotional responses (for example, "Super, loved it"). Social Integrative Needs comments are about social contact and connections (e.g., "Hi, Madam, please give subtitles"). Personal Integrative Needs comments concern self-image and personal development (e.g., "Thanks for this idea"). Tension-Release Needs comments expressing relaxation or stress relief. Similarly, Categories of motivations include Utilitarian Comments, which are driven by informational requirements or practicalities (e.g., "Can you provide meal prep ideas for weight loss?"). as well as hedonistic remarks motivated by pleasure seeking, entertainment or emotional gratification (e.g., "Very funny and informative video"). Sentiments of the comments can be Positive, expressing enjoyment, appreciation, or positive feedback (e.g., "Super, loved it"). Negative comments criticize aspects like quality, speed, or content (e.g., "Irritating background music"). finally, Neutral Comments that are neither positive nor negative but request clarification or information (e.g., "Which wheat is that in the dosa recipe?").

A total of 500 comments (250 from utilitarian videos and 250 from hedonistic videos) were coded and evaluated using the five gratification demands established by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). To find out how viewer engagement corresponds to various gratification demands, each of the 500 comments was classified according to the five gratification kinds established by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). The table below indicates the distribution of these needs among utilitarian and hedonistic video content types.

Gratification Type	Utilitarian N	Utilitarian %	Hedonism N	Hedonism %	Total N	Total %
Cognitive Needs	197	78.8%	78	31.2%	275	55.0%
Affective Needs	15	6.0%	142	56.8%	157	31.4%
Social Integrative Needs	12	4.8%	38	15.2%	50	10.0%
Personal Integrative Needs	6	2.4%	4	1.6%	10	2.0%
Tension-Release Needs	0	0.0%	8	3.2%	8	1.6%
Total	250	100%	250	100%	500	100%

Table 2 : Gratification Types Based on UGT (Utilitarian vs. Hedonistic Videos)

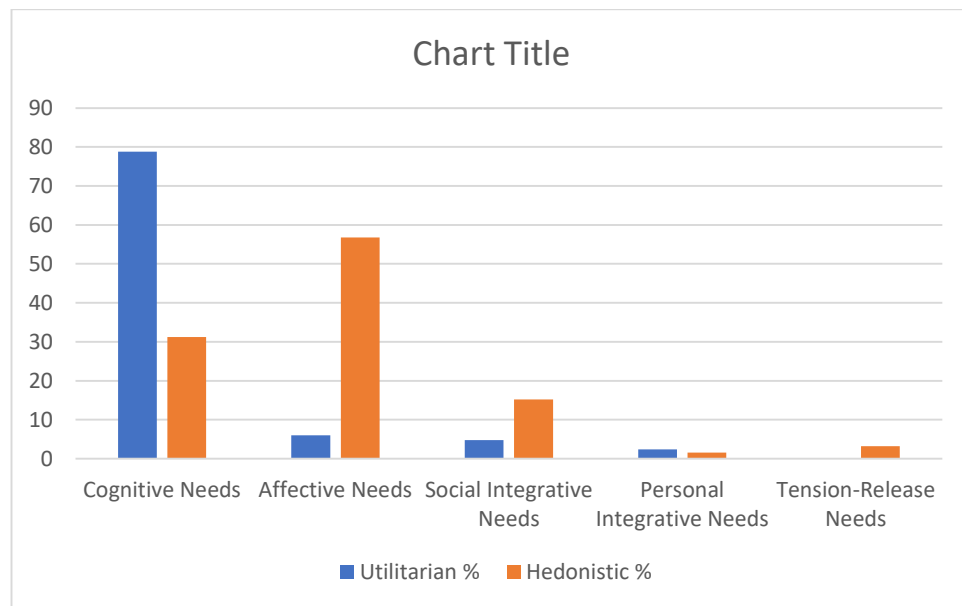


Fig 2: Gratification Types Based on UGT (Utilitarian vs. Hedonistic Videos)

As indicated in Table 2 and Fig 2, cognitive needs dominated utilitarian video comments (78.8%), demonstrating a high audience desire for practical information. In contrast, affective demands were more prevalent in hedonistic material (56.8%), indicating emotional or entertainment-based involvement. The presence of social integrative and tension-release demands in hedonistic videos implies that viewers seek such content for connection and stress relaxation, underlining the dominance of hedonistic gratifications in digital food communication.

To further understand the primary reasons for viewer engagement, each comment was coded by motivational type, whether utilitarian (informational and practical) or hedonistic (fun and emotional fulfillment). The table below shows the motivational breakdown of comments for utilitarian and hedonistic videos.

Motivation Type	Utilitarian N	Utilitarian %	Hedonistic N	Hedonistic %	Total N	Total %
Utilitarian	218	87.2%	18	7.2%	236	47.2%
Hedonistic	32	12.8%	232	92.8%	264	52.8%
Total	250	100%	250	100%	500	100%

Table 3: Motivation Types in Viewer Comments (Utilitarian vs. Hedonistic Videos)

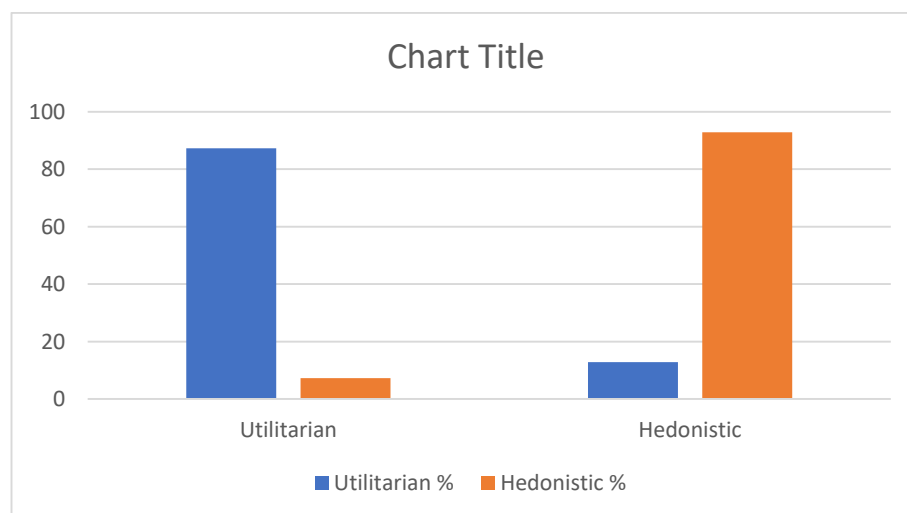


Fig 3: Motivation Types in Viewer Comments (Utilitarian vs. Hedonistic Videos)

Table 3 and Figure 3 show that utilitarian content got the majority (87.2%) of functionally motivated comments, while hedonistic material was largely driven by emotional and aesthetic motives (92.8%). This provides weight to the hypothesis that hedonism dominates digital food communication.

In addition to gratifications and motivations, the sentiment of viewer comments was examined to determine the emotional tone and audience reaction to the videos. Every comment was classified as positive, neutral, or

negative. The table below shows the emotion distribution between the utilitarian and hedonistic video categories.

Sentiment	Utilitarian N	Utilitarian %	Hedonistic N	Hedonistic %	Total N	Total %
Positive	128	51.2%	172	68.8%	300	60.0%
Neutral	91	36.4%	54	21.6%	145	29.0%
Negative	31	12.4%	24	9.6%	55	11.0%
Total	250	100%	250	100%	500	100%

Table 4 : Sentiment Distribution of Viewer Comments Across Video Types

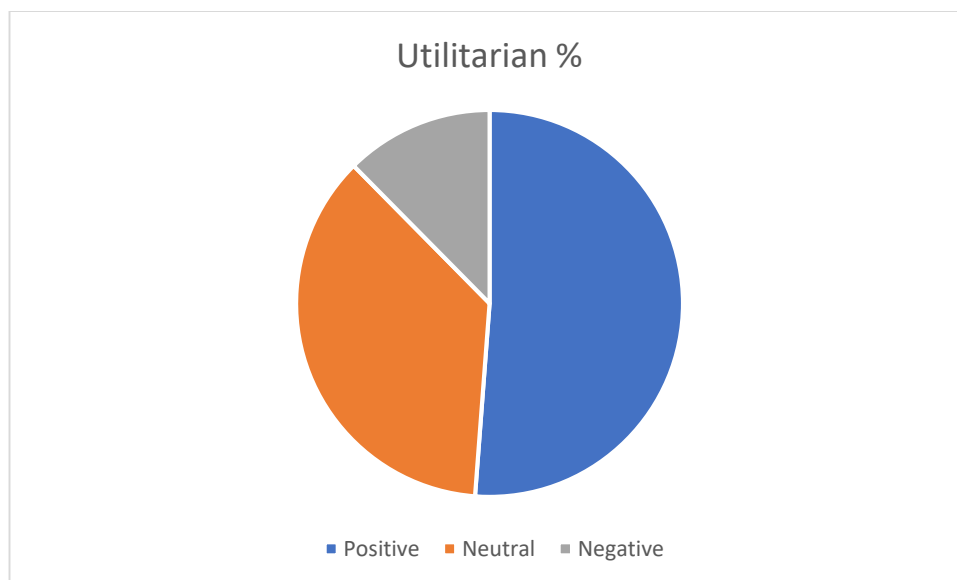


Fig 4: Sentiment Distribution of Viewer Comments Across Video Types

As shown in Table 4 and Figure 4 positive sentiments were significantly more prevalent in hedonistic video comments (68.8%) compared to utilitarian ones (51.2%). Meanwhile, utilitarian videos received a higher proportion of neutral comments (36.4%), reflecting a more functional, information-seeking viewer attitude. Negative sentiments were relatively low in both categories. These findings indicate that hedonistic content elicits stronger emotional responses, supporting the idea that such content is more emotionally engaging and gratifying for the audience.

Conclusion

This study investigated the dominance of hedonism in digital food communication using the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), examining viewer engagement with utilitarian and hedonistic YouTube food videos popular in Tamil Nadu. The findings consistently show that while utilitarian content meets essential cognitive needs by providing practical information and guidance, hedonistic content overwhelmingly meets affective, social integrative, and tension-release needs by providing emotional gratification, sensory pleasure, and entertainment. The research of 500 user comments revealed that hedonistic videos not only provoked more emotionally charged and aesthetically pleasing comments, but also generated much more positive sentiments than utilitarian videos. Furthermore, motivational analysis revealed that users engaged with food content for hedonistic reasons such as pleasure, delight, and emotional connection rather than strictly informational or practical ones. Thus, the study verifies the hypothesis that hedonism dominates digital food communication, indicating a broader cultural shift in which the experience, sensory, and emotional components of food increasingly dominate its functional and utilitarian value in online platforms. As digital media evolves, content makers and marketers must acknowledge this trend by highlighting food's emotional, aesthetic, and experiential appeal in order to connect with consumers more closely. Future research should broaden this investigation across locations, platforms, and age groups to gain a better understanding of the changing relationship between food, media, and user pleasure in the digital age.

While this study sheds light on the widespread use of hedonism in digital food communication, it is not without limitations. The investigation was limited to a sample of 10 YouTube videos and 500 user comments, which may not accurately reflect the diversity of digital food content or audience behavior in broader contexts. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on Tamil Nadu-based content, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other regions or cultures.

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