

# The Self-Manipulation of My Pervasive, Perceived Vital Energy through Product Use: An Introspective-Praxis Perspective

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Consumer researchers, as well as others, have overlooked the perceived vital energy dimension of consumer behavior. To deal with this issue, this article uses an introspective-praxis approach to explore as "thickly" as possible the pervasive role perceived vital energy plays in one consumer's everyday use of products, namely my own. In doing so, it introduces an energy-based model of product use that encompasses the characteristics/states of that vital energy and the product-related operations employed by the consumer to manipulate those states. After these aspects of energy are considered, several thematic examples concerning its role and significance in my own consumption are discussed. Finally, implications for future research are considered.

Much of consumer research has failed to describe many experiential aspects of my own consumer behavior, especially the everyday dynamics of my pervasive, self-perceived vital energy. This point is even more striking when I consider the widespread use of the word "energy" in everyday consumer discourse (e.g., product names such as Sheer Energy and Extra Energy Enzymes and ad messages that use such phrases as "high energy," such as in an ad for the New York Health and Racquet Club). On the basis of the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 31), energy might be characterized in terms of two widely used ontological container metaphorical expressions: "I *put a lot of energy into* product use as well as *getting energy out of* product use." In this article, I seek to inscribe the pervasive dimension of energy into the domain of consumer research by unmasking its role as a key motivator and aspect of the consumer's use of products to achieve desired energy states. In doing so, I also hope to promote consideration of both the body and consciousness of it as being more than matters of the mere technical concern that Western culture has generally imposed on them (Romanyshyn 1989).

To apply this perspective, I will use an introspective approach based on a number of related methodologies that will allow me to provide a thorough account of how this vital energy works and functions in relation

to my own consumption. I will build upon the phenomenological concept of researchers' own work as a part of their extended selves (Belk 1989) by including and drawing retrospectively on my own experience through memory, rigorous self-analysis, and continuing thought-experiential experiments (i.e., observing and/or thinking through how I react in various situations, either during actual situations or in imagination). Corresponding and salient theory is also considered. Perhaps the best way for the reader to view my integration of theory and experience is to visualize entering into the middle of a continuous transformative process in which I deal with the "objective" structure of my own consciousness (Hunter 1983). Thus, I am now engaging the reader in the process of my experience, theoretical reasoning, signification, and interpretation in order to discuss energy and product use. In doing so, the following topics will be considered: (1) energy in theoretical terms of its definition and consciousness of it, (2) energy and product use, (3) examples of energy-state changes through product use, and (4) implications for future consumer research.

## ENERGY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The pervasive theme of my personal consumption gestalt revolves around energy and my consciousness of it. Although my view of energy has been influenced by views such as Freud's libido theory (Freud 1929), nonlibidinal psychic (attentional) energy theory (Rochberg-Halton 1984), and living-systems theory (Miller 1978), it has largely been informed by Asian literature and views and my own experience with their

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transformative mind-body psychotechnologies (Roberts 1989), especially those of the Tibetans, Indians, Chinese, and Japanese. Asians have developed an experiential view of energy in which one studies and works with one's vital energy to generate various states of being and consciousness (Eliade [1954] 1973; Gould 1991a, 1991b). A Tibetan scholar and practitioner of yoga and meditation (Norbu 1983, p. 18) defines this vital energy (*prana*) as a phenomenon that is "connected to all physical functions, above all breathing, and influences the mind. Its nature is movement."

In Norbu's view (and many other Asians from India to Japan) and from my own experience, this pervasive energy moves throughout the body, involves psychophysiological sensations that to varying degrees can be detected in one's consciousness, and is connected to and interacts with the external energy of the environment, including other people. Similarly, Kumagai (1988) defines *ki*, the Japanese word for this energy, as the "fervor of vitality." It is felt subjectively in daily consciousness in terms of desire, arousal, sensation, and affect (cf. Lakoff 1987) and is even thought of as the psychophysiological carrier of a sign (i.e., apart from its content; cf. Katakis and Katakis 1986). It may be heightened, focused, and directed. Ordinary consumer activities such as drinking an energy-giving vitamin drink may be used to manipulate and balance this *ki*. The results of these activities manifest in physical signs and somatic motor representations (Zajonc and Markus 1982) of energy change, such as changes in energy level, perception, heat, pressure, movement, tingling, muscular tension, concrete and abstract imagery (e.g., imaging objects vs. seeing lights), and so on. Moreover, recent evidence from related emotion and arousal research suggests that different patterns of peripheral responses (e.g., heart rate, bodily heat) comprise different energy states and feelings, each with their own distinct labels (e.g., anger, happiness). This stands in contrast to the previous view of Schacter and others that such responses are virtually the same for every emotion (Rime, Philippot, and Cisamolo 1990). Thus, as I discuss how I experience and manage my vital energy in consumption, it should be kept in mind that I am speaking of the everyday phenomena of immediately bodily felt (noticeable) experience (Jennings 1986; i.e., sensations and their mediating desires, moods, emotions, and thought—all of which are perceived manifestations of our energy, which can be differentiated in distinct patterns of feelings and the labels we apply to them, and which we can consciously manipulate to varying degrees).

The gestalt of the perceived effects of these sensations, affect, and cognitive phenomena constitutes what I call "perceived vital energy." But I cannot always perceive all manifestations of energy directly. For example, I normally cannot perceive brain waves that nonetheless are expressions of my energy. They can become a form

of perceived energy, however, if I monitor them on psychophysiological equipment or even attempt to manipulate them through the use of biofeedback equipment. These distinctions are important because most prior research has not really considered perceived energy, especially as something that an individual can manipulate. Thus, this view marks a departure from most Western approaches that have investigated energy largely in terms of objective academic research frameworks (e.g., observed behavior or nervous-system energy; cf. Cofer and Appley 1964) rather than as everyday, subjective phenomena. On the other hand, Asian systems directly apply energy theory to daily life so that an individual following them finds him- or herself embedded in a system of related practices (e.g., Dhonden 1986; Norbu 1983): "If you engage in this practice, you will experience these states" or "When going through your daily life, discover and be aware of what you feel."

Thus, following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), I have observed that Western scholarly tradition structures its energy discourse in terms of "scientific research," often far removed from people's direct application in their everyday lives, while Asian scholarly tradition structures its discourse in terms of everyday praxis. This praxis view comprises a different existential perspective on theory that for more than 20 years I have found useful in two ways. First, I have found Asian theories and thought to be more compelling with respect to the understanding of energy and consciousness because I could actually and easily adapt their insights to my daily life. Second, I have tried to adapt Western theoretical insights, where relevant, to my daily life rather than to view them as mere academic abstractions. Using this view, I will extract insights regarding what I perceive as the effects of energy in consumers' lives. While I focus here on product use, I believe that such a perspective can transvalue our understanding of buyer behavior as well, so that we come to regard each consumer as his or her own vital energy manager. For example, each step of both the purchase and product-use processes may be seen as involving consumers' self-management of perceived vital energy states, which can be defined along three dimensions to be developed later (i.e., energy level, energy quality, and absorption level).

To be sure, some in the West have specifically recognized subjective energy (Thayer 1987). Indeed, Jackson (1967) notes how the concept of energy in science may have had its origins in our animistic and subjective notions of it. Perceived energy is in fact involved in a process of metaphorical translation between our interdependent somatic and psychological systems (Johnson 1986), a process Jung ([1928] 1969) called psychization. In this regard, Tibetan metaphor compares the relationship between mind-consciousness and energy with a horseman riding a horse, respectively (Cozort 1986). These insights remain abstruse, however, unless we view

the consumer as an active participant who through bodily felt experience and praxis can consciously and deliberately manipulate his or her energy. Thus, as noted earlier, an activity, such as product use, may be viewed as a metaphorical container for energy and related states of being (i.e., putting in or taking out energy; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Similarly, such activity also represents the cathexis of energy onto product-signs (Rochberg-Halton 1984).

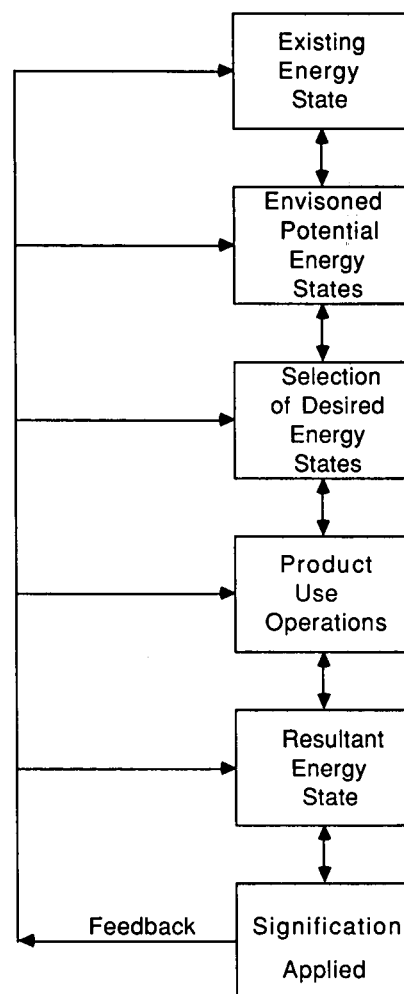
## ENERGY AND PRODUCT USE

Product use may be defined as a process in which consumers engage to manipulate their vital energy. Consuming products moves one from one energy state to another. As noted by Holbrook (1987), among others, however, traditional buying-behavior models in consumer behavior ignore this process. They tend to jump from purchase to satisfaction, leaving a void for product use (e.g., Howard 1989). One model that did consider a process close to what will be modeled here was that of Ward, Hill, and Gardner (1988), who outlined the playing of promotional games in terms of an initial mood, various perceptions of the game, a participation decision, process of play, results of participation, and the resulting mood. The product-use process can be similarly modeled from the point where buyer behavior ends in product trial/purchase. It also reflects the metaphorical path process outlined by Johnson (1986) in which an individual attempts to move from an initial state to a desired state. However, in the model here, I call it a resultant state since we cannot assume that people always achieve desired states. This process may also represent what Lakoff (1987, p. 391) calls the "folk understanding of physics," which he applies to psycho-physiological states of energy. Based on his example of anger as an input energy producing an output energy, such as heat, prior states may be seen as input energy producing resulting states. In the model of product use being developed here, a number of states serve as energy input to other states that then serve as inputs to still others. Product use in the form of various functional operations, themselves energy expressions, facilitates and helps consumers manage energy state changes. Perhaps most commonly, products may metaphorically be seen as embodying coagulated, potential energy (i.e., matter), which is used up directly during consumption (e.g., a snack that picks a consumer up; blood in meat, which is associated with living force, energy, and arousal that athletes and others can utilize; Twig 1983). Many other products may be seen as catalysts that produce changes in consumer states without themselves being used up or actually changed (e.g., the consumer enters the presence of a calming object and becomes less tense).

The product-use process as shown in Figure 1 generally occurs in the following sequence: (1) the consumer is in an existing energy state; (2) s/he envisions

Figure 1

MODEL OF VITAL ENERGY AND THE PRODUCT USE PROCESS



potential states of energy involving product use (cf. Hirschman 1985a), sometimes to ameliorate an existing state (e.g., eating to alleviate hunger) and sometimes to reach a desired state other than the present one, which is not necessarily undesirable—the very act of contemplating other product-use states may be desirable, an act of commodity reification (Jameson 1979) and fantasy in terms of object relations (Rochberg-Halton 1984); (3) s/he selects desired states and specific products and/or nonconsumption-oriented activities, such as sleeping or walking, to actualize them; (4) s/he then engages in a number of functional product-use operations and/or operations related to nonconsumption activities; (5) these take the consumer to a resultant post-product-use energy state (postactivity state); (6) s/he evaluates that state both cognitively and affectively and

applies signification to it, which may reflect various shades of positivity/negativity (e.g., "I'm (dis)satisfied," "It feels good," "I'm full," "I'm high," and so on); and (7) this signification feeds back to all the other various steps.

It should be noted that signification is the last step in this model since it corresponds to (dis)satisfaction in traditional models (e.g., Howard 1989), but signification also occurs throughout the process and is a product of the various energy signs, such as heat, tension and so on, along with other situationally salient environmental circumstances that translate back and forth into the consumer's meaning system. This system encompasses everyday folk understanding and experience of consumption in terms of its psychophysiology and related physics (cf. Lakoff 1987). The process of constant signification along with related energy-state comparisons is reflected in the two-way arrows in Figure 1 that indicate an iterative process in which contiguous steps feed back and forth into one another (e.g., in self-experimentation, new resulting states lead to constant revision of product-use operations). Thus, energy states should not be viewed as stable, unchanging entities but in fact as processes of constant flux (Solomon 1981).

Further, although I would argue that perceived vital energy in its pervasiveness also manifests itself in buyer-behavior models in the guise of various psychophysiological states related to the formation of purchase decisions, it is by construing product use as the transformation of desired into resulting energy states and signification through use operations that the energy construct may be most helpful to consumer research. In fact, in many cases, the product-use decision is separate from the product-purchase decision and involves envisioning potential states of product use, often based more on one's inventory of possessions rather than on potential acquisitions as in purchase decisions. This perspective focuses our attention on the vital energy invested in product-related energy states and operations as a core aspect of consumption.

Finally, two additional points need to be addressed with respect to the existential context of this proposed product-use process model. First, when envisioning potential energy states, selecting desired ones, and so forth, the individual may also consider engaging in nonconsumption-oriented activities, such as sleeping, love-making, meditating, and so on, rather than product-use operations. Thus, while the process of energy regulation through these activities is similar to that for product use, it is important to note that sometimes a consumer may actually make a choice between engaging in a consumption activity or a nonconsumption activity at the third step of the model involving state selection (e.g., I might choose to meditate to calm down, play calming music to do so, or do both). In a related manner, we might note that the individual will take the resultant energy state as a base for further desires and

actions no matter whether they come to be expressed in terms of consumption or other activities. Second, the goals of energy management through product use as well as through nonconsumption-oriented activities depend on individuals' sensitivity to energy, their global views of themselves and life, and also situational characteristics of the energy and other factors discussed later in relation to product-use energy states. These goals may include, as they do for me, such interrelated concerns as (1) practicality in terms of maintaining vigor, health, and the ability to function in daily life; (2) achieving intellectual, phenomenological, and spiritual self-awareness; and (3) experiencing the sheer intrinsic joy and pleasure of the play of different energy states.

### Product-Use Energy States—Desired, Envisioned, and Actual

The states consumers seek may be viewed in terms of Thayer's (1987) two-dimensional subjective energy model. The two dimensions are energy level (i.e., energized vs. tired; cf. Miller 1978 on entropy and negentropy) and the quality or affective tone of the energy (i.e., calm vs. tense or anxious). The former dimension has to do with having or not having the energy to do something. The latter represents an individual's state of being. Thayer applies these two dimensions in forming four energy conditions: tense-energized, tense-tired, calm-energized, and calm-tired. I find this model compelling in terms of my own experience as later extended examples will illustrate. However, I would add absorption level (i.e., absorbed—not absorbed) as an energy dimension representing a broad spectrum of conditions, such as whether one feels directed, attentive, charged up, a free flow of energy,<sup>1</sup> and excited-involved (Hirschman 1985a) versus feeling scattered or distracted. I base this third dimension on my experience as well as on the view that psychobiological states such as anxiety differ in properties from being "psyched up" (Neiss 1988). These three dimensions form a typology of eight conditions shown in Table 1. For instance, consider the calm-energized-absorbed state. I encounter this state in various "highs" when I am feeling very energetic, calm, and absorbed in terms of being fully present in the moment and consciously watching and experiencing my energy. Such a state occurs for me, for instance, when I take a break from an intense dramatic movie on television and, leaving it, enter a space free

<sup>1</sup>Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 1990) has studied the concept of "flow," which he defines as an intrinsically rewarding experience. However, although Csikszentmihalyi (1990) relates this to what he calls psychic energy or attention, I find that I define energy more broadly in terms of observable and manipulatable sensations and feelings. I also disagree that flow must necessarily spring from tests of challenge and skill—it can occur anytime. Thus, when he (1988, 1990) compares flow and Asian yoga, I believe he reductively emphasizes cognitive challenge rather than direct energy experience.

TABLE 1  
TYPOLOGY OF ENERGY STATES

State	Definition	Examples
Tense-energized-absorbed	Anxious, feeling energetic, and absorbed in the state	Working hard and stressed but do not stop; a tense caffeine high
Tense-tired-absorbed	Anxious, feeling tired but still absorbed or excited	Playing an exhausting game with a tense, competitive attitude but do not want to stop
Calm-energized-absorbed	Relaxed, feeling energetic and absorbed in the state; perhaps most comparable to "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990)	Listening to a relaxing but "high" piece of music
Calm-tired-absorbed	Relaxed, feeling tired and absorbed in the state	An endorphin "high" after very exhausting exercise
Tense-energized-not absorbed	Anxious, feeling energized and not absorbed, excited, or stimulated	Doing household chores that are not stimulating and that make one tense, but the energy is there to do them
Tense-tired-not absorbed	Anxious, feeling tired and not absorbed, excited, or stimulated	Same as above only in a drained condition
Calm-energized-not absorbed	Relaxed, feeling energized but not absorbed, excited, or stimulated	Doing something such as eating with calm alertness but little gusto
Calm-tired-not absorbed	Relaxed, feeling tired but not absorbed, excited, or stimulated	Watching television with a mild degree of attention just short of sleep

from its engulfing intensity and my tense-energized-absorbed state. I literally feel the tension ooze out of my skin and release into the air. But I am still absorbed, for this state is as intense in its own way as is my watching of the television drama.

Thus, absorption itself may be embodied in various types of "highs" (i.e., various absorbing states of energy-consciousness in which our usual patterns of sense perception and thought manifest in many different or "altered" forms; Hirschman 1985a). Two major types of "highs" are (1) all-absorbing energy—the energy speeds up and gets excited so that I feel as though I and all the surrounding environment, including people, as my energy field are pure electric energy with flesh and matter present only to put a face on it, and (2) all-absorbing space—the energy and my breathing (a sign for energy in Asian thought; e.g., Dhonden 1986) slow down so that everything is motionless space including myself, and all appearances, to the extent that I even notice them, are nothing more than the dreamlike colors and adornments of that space.

The three energy dimensions may also be modified by other state qualities defined in Table 2. In addition, there are specific product-determined states that add their own distinct energy taste or feel. For example, a ginseng tea high makes me feel calm and spacey, while a caffeine high makes me feel nervous and speedy. The importance of all these various energy states is that they become the motivating targets of desire to "change the energy," as something either to be changed or to be

changed into. In this regard, one's present state conditions both his or her desired and resultant states so that changing the energy means that one is literally transforming one's emotions and sensations as well as one can, given one's degree of energy sensitivity, ability to manage it, and various environmental factors that support or interfere with the process.

### Product-Use Operating Principles Applied to "Change the Energy"

There are a number of operating principles involved in product use in which I engage to move toward a desired state (see Table 3). In general, various theories of motivation, drives, needs, and arousal offer explanations for how these product-drive operations induce state changes (cf. Gould 1991a). These theories suggest a bifurcated motivation-response structure, with homeostatic drive theories explaining comfort needs, involving the reduction of a drive (e.g., relieving hunger by eating), and heterostatic exploratory theories that explain the seeking of pleasure beyond comfort in terms of consumers' use of stimulation to seek excitement and reduce boredom (Menninger 1967; Scitovsky 1976). The implication of this dual approach is that certain needs are somehow removed from the reductionistic mechanism of drive theory.

However, I find it useful to see the various experiences of product use in a more unified fashion. The product-use operations shown in Table 3 may be seen in terms

**TABLE 2**  
**MAJOR ENERGY STATE/SITUATION CHARACTERISTICS**

State/characteristics	Definition	Examples
Potential (sleeping) energy vs. kinetic (awakened) energy	Energy in stored form within a person or object vs. energy that has been aroused or put into action (cf. Miller 1978)	Resting state or food vs. exercise or energy from food used in activity, respectively
Chronic vs. acute or immediate energy states	General vitality and energy vs. a person's immediate energy-feeling state, reflective of the present situation	"I'm pretty energetic most of the time" as opposed to "I've got myself aroused for this now"
Yin vs. yang	The very presence of opposites is recognized; Yin is wet, soft, cold, dark, and female while Yang is dry, hard, hot, light, and male (cf. Menninger 1967 and Chia with Winn 1984)	Cool liquids that make me feel cool and watery—yin; hot liquids and certain herbs (e.g., ginseng) make me feel dry and potent—yang
Observable vs. unobservable effects	Conspicuous, obvious energy effects in terms of sensation vs. those that are not readily apparent and may never be	Taking a drug with direct, immediate impact vs. taking a vitamin from which the effect is not observable
Placebo effects	An observable effect that may not actually have its basis in a real physical effect—psychosomatic (Wilkins 1986)	Taking herbs or vitamins and never really being certain of their effects
Energy fields and group energy	An individual's interaction with surrounding energy including that of other people (see, e.g., Sherry 1990)	Creating a personal living space that feels "right"
Body locations	Energy situates itself in different parts of the body (e.g., the chakras in Asian theory; Eliade [1954] 1973)	I feel "high" in my head, tense in my stomach

of a three-level hierarchy. Expending energy in making an effort is primary in that it is involved in all other operations. Then, we can frame the second level in terms of what Aron and Aron (1986) describe as a two-phase cycle of experiencing and balancing: expanding (arousing) and integrating (dearousing). In this perspective, I may have experiences that are expansive and exciting, perhaps in being drive accentuating, absorbing, aesthetic, or consciousness expanding. In fact, my passion for these experiences may even take on drive properties in that I both desire and try to achieve them. But even the most exciting experience has its optimal stimulation level (Hill and Gardner 1987) and saturation limits. For example, Dhonden (1986) points out that an individual can only operate in a sensory mode, such as staring at an attractive picture, for a limited period of time before his or her eyes will water and/or hurt. Thus, at such a point of saturation, I need to balance and ground my energy. If I am getting too spaced out, high, or moved, I need to integrate that experience by changing to still another state of relaxation and suspension of the previous one. This may involve imposing self-control on my energy and pleasure by using will-power to balance desire (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). It is also true, however, that, while I am savoring some act of consumption, I do not necessarily perceive a ho-

meostatic process but rather am beyond such limitations in my absorbed, single-minded pursuit of peaking.

However, even return to engaging in so-called comfort needs, such as eating, can be aesthetic in terms of Zen-like "at-oneness." Moreover, all experiences, whatever significations we might apply to them, involve our energy. Thus, while I clearly share in the "higher level," aesthetic significations we might apply to a Fassbinder movie, for example, I nonetheless find that the use of aesthetically oriented products shares in the larger homeostatic energy process of my everyday life. This to me is not mechanistic but instead involves a consumption aesthetic in which all experiences are rooted in alternating currents of energy and networks of dynamic homeostatic relationships. A useful metaphor to consider is the orchestra. It starts with a certain structure in terms of instruments and sounds. Within this seemingly limited, mechanical framework, a composer can create all sorts of music almost without limit, including expansive crescendos and integrative decrescendos (cf. Rochberg-Halton 1984). Likewise, I see myself working with various manifestations of energy through a relatively limited number of senses and sensory pathways in order to experience and manipulate via consumption the many types of sensations and significations that I assign to them. In engaging in product use operations,

TABLE 3  
PRODUCT USE OPERATIONS INVOLVED IN ENERGY MANIPULATION

Principle	Definition	Example
<p>Effort:</p> <p>Making an effort, mobilizing energy—"can do" or "will to do"</p>	<p>Use and investment of energy in activity (Miller 1978) and attention (Csikszentmihalyi 1990); the expenditure of energy in activity is continuous but does not always represent a loss of energy—some activities such as jogging "energize" consumers despite calorie losses</p>	<p>Effort put into consumer-search behavior; effort put into preparing a meal, exercise, or other product-use activities</p>
<p>Expanding and integrating:</p> <p>Working with energy by "(de)charging" or "(de)arousing" it</p>	<p>Self-stimulation through product use that activates energy or deactivates it in three respects: (1) affecting one's general energy level by raising or lowering it (Thayer 1987), (2) inciting or calming energy quality in a particular situation (Thayer 1987), and (3) directing energy into absorption, excitement, involvement, and positive energy flow vs. not being able to (Hirschman 1985a)</p>	<p>General energy level: consume energy-rich food; situation: take a drink or a pill to calm energy; charge energy to a higher level: listen to an absorbing audiotape to channel "high" energy</p>
<p>Balancing energy (cycle of expansion and integration)</p>	<p>A process of seeking homeostasis in which the (de)charging of energy is directed to optimal stimulation through mood management (Hill and Gardner 1987), heterostatic adaptation (Menninger 1967), purification, expansion (activity) and integration (rest; Aron and Aron 1986), and control of energy and pleasure management (cf. Gould 1991a; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991)</p>	<p>Eating a snack to gain energy and/or change mood; changing to a new diet to cleanse or purify body and mind and revitalize the self</p>
<p>Other specific praxis operations:</p> <p>Externalizing vs. internalizing energy management</p> <p>Using power objects and substances ("getting high" or experiencing the "vibes")</p>	<p>Using products to work with or manifest energy vs. taking an action on an entirely internal basis (Hirschman 1985a)</p> <p>A process involving the use of products that possess the power to create, catalyze, or facilitate high-absorptive states; it includes (de)sacralization of objects (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), fetishization (Ellen 1988), tangibilization (Belk and Wallendorf 1990), investment of psychic energy (Belk 1988; Rochberg-Halton 1984), and altering consciousness (Hirschman 1985a)</p>	<p>Getting rid of stress by watching television or listening to music to "chill out" vs. inner meditating</p> <p>Using an herbal tea or drug to achieve a high state; my possession of a figurine of a Hawaiian goddess made of lava that I have both sacralized and fetishized by keeping it in a special place</p>
<p>Consumption shamanism</p>	<p>Using power objects but in a distinctly active way to achieve ecstatic flow states that mimic if they do not altogether achieve the states of shamans throughout the world. These states often are so absorptive that they take an individual beyond the focus on the product-use-generating experience to a high state of bliss (cf. Eliade 1964)—a process of psychological alchemy (Jung [1944] 1977) and consciousness alteration (Hirschman 1985a)</p>	<p>Working into a high state through the use of music and/or dance to achieve ecstatic states in which the mind is totally absorbed in energy and/or space</p>
<p>Opponent-process effects and acquired motivation as deliberate processes of self-manipulation</p>	<p>Knowing your energy so well that you know that using or consuming something you do not like will eventually change it into something you do like as you shift or adapt (cf. DePaulo 1986)—working with both arousing and balancing</p>	<p>Changing my energy for what I thought would be healthier chronic energy state by giving up meat; I knew that I at first would hate this but learned that I could transfer my love of meat to other foods</p>
<p>Self-experimentation</p>	<p>A process in which an individual comes to know the exact effects of various substances and other types of products on his or her energy and then to titrate out and measure pleasures in terms of "too little," "too much," or "just right" (see, e.g., Wilkinson, Darby, and Mant 1987)—a process of both arousing and balancing energy</p>	<p>I constantly experiment with different types of music to see whether they make me calm or tense and excited or unexcited and in what ways (e.g., feeling tense or calm in my stomach)</p>

I continuously express, balance, change, and explore my energy in many different modes for the purpose of attaining desired states of pleasure and self-discovery. These modes are in the third level of the hierarchy (i.e., specific praxis operations involving various mixes of the other two levels: external vs. internal energy management, using "power objects," consumption shamanism, opponent process effects, and self-experimentation; see Table 3).

### EXAMPLES OF PRODUCT USE TO ACHIEVE DESIRED ENERGY STATES

In this section, after describing the introspective methodology to be used, I will provide a few personally intimate, thematic examples, from among many, of how my concept of perceived vital energy and its related significations have developed and provided a coherent structuring of my experience of product use (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

#### Introspective Methodology

Although I previously dealt with the introspective approach, I will elaborate and extend aspects of it here in leading into my discussion of the examples. The reason I used this method is twofold: I could assemble a much deeper and richer data set from my own experience than I could otherwise, and there are aspects to my perspective that I describe as "relatively unique"—reflecting my own lived experience (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989)—and that I believe constitute a case in point that can help to map the range and boundaries of consumer behavior. I hope that, without solipsism or judgmental readings on my part or the readers', these data can be understood in terms of the conceptual gestalt in which the reader grasps another's experience conceptually and/or the phenomenological gestalt in which the reader meaningfully relates another's experience to his or her own (Thompson 1990). I know from years of conversations on these topics with all sorts of people that many share my views of energy to varying degrees. Westerners who are "into" so-called New Age activities, martial arts, and/or Eastern religions will share in many of these views, as will many Asians themselves. (I myself am a 44-year-old male Caucasian American.) However, even those not involved with these activities experience energy (e.g., Thayer 1987) and should be able to relate to many of my views of it.

Phenomenological approaches, especially those of existential-phenomenology, which focus on a consumer's own experience (Thompson et al. 1989), provide a starting point for my inquiry. Although such approaches are often framed in collective sample terms, they may be used on an individual basis (Colaizzi 1973) and may also include researchers as subjects (Wertz and Green-

hut 1985). Moreover, I will use the method of revelatory stories rooted in both existential-phenomenology (Hunter 1983) and humanistic approaches (Holbrook 1987, 1988). In this regard, both conceptual and particular humanism (Hirschman 1985b; Mitroff and Kilmann 1978) might be considered. The conceptual humanist focuses on research inspired by reference to one's self-concept. Seeing the energy aspect of my life ignored by consumer researchers, I felt that telling the story of my own experience would be the single best way I could most "thickly" describe (Geertz 1973), interpret (Denzin 1989), and unmask its effects. Similarly, the particular humanist tends to favor case studies (Mitroff and Kilmann 1978), a fact relevant here because I see myself as engaging in a self-reflective case study (cf. Holbrook 1988). I favor such studies because of my own reading of them in such fields as psychotherapy, humanistic psychology, medicine, and sex research in which they help to nomothetically map those domains by privileging rather than ignoring idiographic information.

#### Using Products to Maintain and Accentuate Sexual Drive and Energy

Sexual behavior and experience, at least in certain aspects, can be conditioned by consumption (Gould 1991c). In fact, we can discriminate many states of sexual arousal and energy, much as Eskimos do with snow (Whorf 1978). Here, I will illustrate the effect of food (especially meat and nonmeat diets) on *maintaining* my sexual energy and the use of salt, herbs and aphrodisiacs, and erotica to *accentuate* my sexual energy.

*Maintaining Sexual Energy. Food and sex.*—Ever since I was 22, I have understood in a very profound way that what you consume can affect your sexual drive as well as your energy level. The example I am about to describe represents tired-tense-absorbed states, although sometimes there were also tired-calm states. At that time, 1969, I graduated from college and felt seriously threatened by the military draft and Vietnam. I did not want to go in the army and, after considering different strategies of evasion, I chose to become underweight because I am naturally thin. So I undertook a systematic starvation of myself, eating very little, and lost in the neighborhood of 20–30 pounds. I weighed 104 pounds at the draft physical and was very weak. I experienced not only general diminishment of my energy levels but also a transformation of how I experienced myself. Food was replaced by sex drive as the physical focus of my life, so that food was "fetishized." I was obsessed with it, literally dreamed about it, and what I related to as sexual feelings before now often registered in my consciousness as food feelings. For example, I remember experiencing sensations running throughout my body, including my genitals, so that I felt something akin to sexual feelings through eating. I



am not saying that eating feelings were exactly the same as sexual feelings, but that they overlapped. For example, I did not have erections over food, but I did experience excitement akin to sexual arousal in terms of electric feelings and hot-cold flashes that registered from my genitals upwards when I actually did eat something. Similar sensual-orgasmic feelings have been reported in psychotherapeutic contexts (Schneider 1990). I kept up this minimal diet for months and flunked my first draft physical. But I could not maintain it after that and went on ravenous eating binges in which I would do such things as eat five ice-cream sandwiches in a row.

The event signified to me that I had literally made my body and energy unavailable to a cause and people I reviled. I seem to have regressed from the genital phase to the oral phase in Freud's (1929) model of development. Fortunately, after restoring a normal diet, I was able to make the leap back to normal energy levels. And while I appreciate food, sex is still my preferred arousal focus. However, I have continued to explore the relationship between the substances one consumes and one's ability to arouse sexual energy. In this respect, I always envision states of eating enough to maintain my sexual energy—a throwback to this experience. I determine whether I have eaten enough by whether I feel strong enough to have sex, as manifested in just feeling full enough. If not, then I eat more to get to the point where I am convinced that I am strong enough. Ironically, I feel that this is largely a placebo effect, but my previous experience still weighs heavily in my psyche. I still sometimes intone the mantra of my generation "Make love, not war" with a paradoxical twist of personal meaning.

*Meat—no meat and sex.*—Many years ago I decided to give up eating meat mainly for health reasons, though I am also persuaded by other concerns. However, it was particularly tough to decide to do because I was not sure I would have enough energy, sexual and otherwise. I experimented for a number of years and switched on and off various diets, both with and without meat. I needed to discover that I could be robust and active without it. I believe the desire for meat in terms of energy was largely a negative placebo effect caused by a fear of "not getting enough protein" and in being afraid of being as weak as I had been when I fasted. I gradually overcame this fear through opponent-process (see Table 3) effects of switching my drives to other foods that were also powerful (e.g., the use of "yang" salt to feel loose and potent, which is discussed next).

*Accentuating (Charging) Sexual Energy: "Getting Excited."* *Salt.*—No product probably seems more ordinary than salt. Yet salt is seen as a very potent product, particularly in Asia, and is especially important in macrobiotic diets here. I have experimented with salt in various ways for many years. Early in my exposure

to macrobiotic diets, I experimented with salt as a powerful yang food. In particular, I was interested in the reputed aphrodisiacal powers of salt. I tried the heavy use of salt, sometimes with a limit on fluid intake as well and found that it indeed made my sexual power and desire seem stronger. Aside from any placebo effects, however, I have since reasoned that the effects were probably not any true aphrodisiac effect in that they affected my hormones, but instead represented a general toning of my body and in particular a control of the fluids one takes in, which are usually yin and which seemed to work counter to my sex drive. In this manner, I discovered what I call "dry" states (more yang and sexually potent) and "wet" (bloated) states (more yin and less aroused). A dry state may occur in varying degrees, but in its strongest form it leaves me feeling totally potent in my genitals and semi- or totally erect on a fairly constant basis with an ineffable desire for sex. At the same time, I may experience a craving thirst. Both these are signs that I have reached the dry state. The prototypical wet state leaves me feeling heavy—like I have to go to the bathroom sometimes in both ways—often gaseous, and relatively unaroused sexually. In this condition, my energy is "sleeping" as I call it, but still can be aroused albeit with greater effort than is required for dry states. Thus, based on these experiences, I strongly believe in the direct mechanism of increasing yang and sexual power, although I do not use salt very much at present as I generally follow the Western scientific mandate of avoiding sodium to prevent hypertension. I also may use other reputed potentizing yang foods (e.g., buckwheat) and also may regulate my fluid consumption to invoke this process.

*Herbs and aphrodisiacs.*—Herbs are widely used, but, in the sense that I use them, they remain controversial. Herbs for me are power substances with which one can stimulate one's energy. Much of their power resides in the idea of their power as aphrodisiacs. As with the previous salt example, it is doubtful that most are true aphrodisiacs in stimulating actual sexual response *per se* but instead may serve to vitalize the system in general, thus enhancing sexual pleasure and performance. I have tried many different herbs, often based on Asian experience—Asians are large users of reputed aphrodisiacs. For example, I remember many years ago using a very yang herb, burdock root, which seemed to affect me very positively in terms of perceived sexual potency. Any effects that I observe might be placebo effects to be sure, but I feel I derive a great deal of yang power from these herbs that I sometimes directly observe as general energization. When I take herbs in the form of tea, I feel as though I am drinking in their power and potency and cathect energy onto or fetishize their packages (i.e., the very holding of the package seems sometimes to carry its own transmission of energy as manifested in a certain tension in my hand muscles and movement of sensation in my hands and beyond to the

rest of my body). Likewise, I fetishize the store where I buy them and the very act of drinking itself (i.e., I enter a mental space where the very act of consuming them becomes an envisioning of the desired arousing result that actually might occur much later in physicality if at all—a placebo-like effect). Moreover, I envision these things not just in my head but also as sensations and sometimes lightness throughout my body from my genitals up my spine to my head. The very ritual of drinking the tea itself accords me a feeling of calm as manifested paradoxically, if I attend to it, in a slight tension in my temples, the back of my neck, and other spots. I also feel myself being restored in the very act of consumption—the calming heightens sensitivity to sensations I might not otherwise notice. Today I sometimes use a packaged herbal tea, “Male Toner,” which as the name suggests aims at male potency. I must admit I dance in and out of brands to experiment with their various energy effects. I also recently found a ginseng brand that I like because it feels particularly powerful to me in that it has a characteristic bitter ginseng taste and seems very effective in toning my system by making me feel calm and energized. Through self-experimentation, I learn what seems to affect me the most and I develop personal unwritten and ever-evolving rules for consuming products about which there is almost no “scientific” knowledge.

*Television and movies.*—To induce excited sexual states, I find that “raunchy” material in which individuals confront their inner hearts of darkness and find themselves located in energy-consciousness-culture liminality moves me (and which it turns out for me is often European produced), whether it occurs in more “high art” or less artistic endeavors. Thus, erotica, for example, especially in the form of home videos, is a powerful energy force that I use with special deliberateness as an external aphrodisiac at certain times to charge my energy to a higher level.<sup>2</sup> For example, nothing seems more powerful than watching a sexy beach video with bright colors and lots of light to perk up my energy to a level of peak excitement from the winter doldrums. Moreover, particularly interesting erotica (at least to me) brings me face-to-face with the resonant expression of sexual energy in some novel way that breaks down my previous limitations of how I conceive and experience it. I explore the variations of erotica (e.g., different forms of plot and/or national origins, “porn” vs. “high art”) and play with the energy of erotica as an external consumption manipulator of my

energy, as opposed to the usual routes of arousal. Thus, I seek to intensify my pleasurable stimulation through the conscious control of my energy. This differs from “horniness,” which, from my perspective, arises of itself as a spontaneous form of energy arousal, while deliberately charging my sexual energy is an act of consumption. Moreover, while the two, charging and being horny, are often similar, I find their intensity differs. Horniness occurs as a variable state of intensity marked by a tingling in the genital and other areas. Deliberate charging involving an erotic film creates a more intense flow state of excitement so that my heart beat is noticeable and fast, I feel very warm, and my body is quivering with such intensity that I may actually shake. This state sometimes is heightened even more when my wife and I use certain Asian orgasm control techniques that heighten and prolong pleasure in periods spread over days or weeks (Gould 1991b), and then watch an erotic film to create a culminating crescendo of energy—arousal feeding arousal. I can attest that for me there is no other experience quite like this. But, I can only endure it at certain times, and integrating, less hot-blooded acts of love are just as desirable in their own way.

### Using Products to Get “High”: Consumption Shamanism

As noted (see Table 3), consumers engage in consumption shamanism in which they invoke energy through product use to get “high,” that is, the altering of consciousness (Hirschman 1985a), in which perceptions, feelings, cognitions, and sensations are transformed (e.g., speeded up, slowed down, confused, and so on). As an individual who experienced the tumultuous sixties with mind-expanding drugs, alcohol, and rock and roll and who has integrated that experience with both the meditations and shamanism of other cultures, particularly Asian, I view much of consumption as decidedly an experience of getting high. In contrast with sexuality, these highs center largely in the upper regions of the body and head (e.g., feeling all-absorbing space) rather than in the genital area (e.g., feeling warmer there than elsewhere), much as described in Asian chakra theory (cf. Table 3 and also Eliade 1973). Here, I will discuss using two product types to get high: imbibed substances and the arts and entertainment.

*Imbibed Substances: Alcohol and Mind-expanding Drugs.* Alcohol and mind-expanding drugs are clear energy transformers for me. For example, I remember very vividly one formative LSD trip many years ago in which the world literally crumbled in front of my eyes, a vivid illustration to me of the Asian concept of the world as illusory (Eliade 1973). Nowadays, I never use such drugs, but together with my exposure to Asian shamanism and Western hypnosis, they did help me

<sup>2</sup>One reviewer suggested that feminists might object to my views on erotica. I agree with him or her but would note that I consider myself a feminist insofar as I object to exploitation of women in any way. Moreover, there are also “pro-sex” feminists who view erotica as liberating (Schur 1988), and I believe that, if we ever get past sexism as a historical phenomenon, erotica will still remain as a means for both women and men to explore their sexual energy.

develop my concept of energy and consciousness as phenomena that I can alchemically transform through both external imbibing of substances and internal mental means.

Also as a result of the sixties, I learned to think of alcohol as just another drug with special characteristics, much as marijuana, LSD, and other drugs each produce their own specific highs. Although I usually do not drink, I occasionally use alcohol in special social rituals when I want to do what I call "bringing down the energy," almost as a shaman invokes special divine energy. I invoke its energy to be powerful in these social settings, especially when others are drinking and when I want to lift my state to one that matches their energy. The actual nature of the state will vary somewhat depending on the energy of the people involved and situational circumstances, such as where I am. But it does generally involve a physical excitement such that I feel like jumping or dancing and even screaming at times. In fact, the reason this is so shamanistic to me is that I have a similar reaction when I see a shaman dancing either live or on television. A liberating urge comes over me and I feel I get physically stronger. It reminds me of a story I heard about one Tibetan shaman-oracle who in invoking a certain spirit dons armor weighing hundreds of pounds when he goes into trance and dances around, while out of trance he cannot even lift it. This is metaphorically what I feel when I drink, especially in a social setting that is receptive to being wild and to an induction of a carnivalesque transformation of time and space (Castle 1986).

Moreover, music and the energy-arousing presence of women can accentuate and also change the effect into an "orgiastic" blend of energies. I can get so energized that not only at certain peaks do I feel powerful and emboldened, but I also become much more of a performer and actually find that I have to restrain myself from becoming too dominant. As I put it, "I am really flying," an apt metaphor for lifting my sleeping energy to a "higher octave" of activity. From my perspective, this is not an escapist drunken stupor, but instead it is a way to bring myself and others with me into transformed, energy-to-energy encounters. I also often feel I know what those other people are feeling as though I were psychic. I empathetically "drink in" their energy as if it were mine, more clearly than usual (I feel them) and can vividly "see" their feelings embodied in their presence before me (i.e., their body language, such as posture, facial expressions, and the energy they exude become more transparent than usual). Everything and everyone around becomes a part of my energy field so that I become very sensitive to every nuance, unless I drink too much. Ironically, I have to keep a cool head as these "vibrational" energy readings of other people make me feel especially responsible for my behavior toward them. In any case, I rarely invoke the "alcohol spirit" since it sacrifices my overall chronic vitality for

a momentary high and since I have other mental ways of dealing with situations that seem to require drinking. For example, much as in the old "contact high" of the sixties, I can get high on others' drinking and often do this when socializing, with effects similar to those of drinking itself.

*The Arts and Entertainment.* Music, television, movies, books, and art (in the guise of power objects) all possess for me the characteristic of being able to transform my energy, especially into calm-energized-absorbed highs. Two major types of such highs will be illustrated: all-absorbing space and all-absorbing energy.

*All-absorbing space.*—Absorbing-space states are relaxed and involve a quiet euphoria or bliss. For example, certain music, most noticeably minimalist music and New Age music, creates absorbed highs that approximate states of meditation. To listen to this form of music is more compelling than one who has never heard it might think. I do not fall asleep but become focused on the music's flow and watch it pulsate through different parts of my inner space. It feels as though it is "tuning me up vibrationally," as sounds such as gurgling water seem to bubble effervescently through me. Some forms of this music cause emotion located deep within me to rise without any actual event other than the music to cause it, suggesting levels of emotion origin from the abstract to the concrete. For example, sometimes a deep, sublime happy-sadness, perhaps accompanied by tears, arises as the external musical chord strikes an internal one. Other music in this genre brings characteristic meditative highs marked by slow breathing and often by slight pressure in certain spots, often in my temples. Space opens up and reveals itself as I cease being "up-tight." I usually play such music on my Walkman when I'm traveling, such as on a train. At home, I'm more inclined to engage in internal meditation where I'm already relaxed and better able to channel my energy. It seems I'm often too tired and tense when I am away from home to manage my energy internally so I use my Walkman, an external consumption object, to manage my energy and move from a tense-tired-unabsorbed to a calm-absorbed-thought-still-tired state.

*All-absorbing energy.*—When I feel energized and want to get more absorbed and excited, I might read about a shamanistic experience or watch a television show or movie about one to "get off" and invoke potential energies. Thus, I love to watch shows on the Discovery Channel about aboriginal peoples and their spiritual rituals because they tend to arouse in me the impulse to jump up and down in ecstasy, similar to my experience with alcohol. Sometimes I may actually do some empathetic crazy dancing, but, more often, I channel the energy by letting it move from my arms and legs, which feel like jumping and dancing, to my heart and head in a way that is ironically still and calm in the midst of the show's excitement. This signifies for

me that I have invoked the living resonance of my inner primordial being rather than some primeval past (i.e., I am responding to entrancing archetypal energy expressions by focusing my own energy ritualistically; cf. Jung 1964). I also have similar experiences with other genres. For example, some music videos electrify my whole body as their sounds become sensations (as in synesthesia) that cause a big "umph" to go up and down my spine, and I enact and embody various rhythms and dances as "pure energy" while "I, thou and world" tend to cease being entities I cognize dualistically or as separate.

### DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This article thus far has largely explored my own consumption in terms of vital energy. I reported that I use products to move toward such desirable states as being sexually aroused and being high. There are many forms of these states, and they also involve very specific product differences. Clearly not all consumers behave precisely in the same way that I do, but all nonetheless have everyday ordinary ways they cope with their energy ups and downs and manage their consumption experience. Furthermore, all must deal with their energy, although the language they use to inscribe it into consciousness might be reflected in entirely different feelings, perspectives, folk discourses, personal philosophies, and "objective rules and laws" composing their worldviews and behaviors. Consumer researchers using phenomenological as well as other approaches need to uncover these processes and look at the various discourses people use—discourses that will be both similar to and different from various aspects of my own personal discourse. Thus, the main task for consumer research in this regard is to explore the texts of consumer's lives in terms of the energy sensations and consciousness they experience when consuming products.

Further research is indicated in the following areas: (1) various energy-state characteristics and operating principles might be used as theoretical constructs for designing research regarding how other consumers describe their energy, associate products with it, and traverse the stages of the product-use process; (2) objective versus subjective measures of energy might be calibrated to consider their relationship; (3) individual consumer differences reflecting typical energy response patterns or perceptual-behavioral signatures (i.e., individual expressions and/or manifestations of energy phenomena such as how one perceives and enacts one's diet in terms of energy maintenance) should be investigated in relation to product use; (4) product-specific energy effects might be explored to see how they apply differentially; (5) energy exchange and the dynamics of social relationships (cf. Sherry 1990) should be explored to examine interpersonal consumer, services, and sales re-

lationships; (6) life cycle and personal experience should also be focused on to allow for the changes in individuals' perspectives on energy through the life cycle (e.g., the use of rejuvenation products); and (7) various sensory modes and stimuli (i.e., light-seeing, sound-hearing, synesthesia, and so on) should be investigated for specific product-energy effects.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to open a discourse on the "energetic guts" and bodily felt experience of everyday consumption. For me, the maintenance and enhancement of my energy is the central motivator for much of my consumption. However, although I may frame the issue of energy in a somewhat novel though not totally atypical manner, all of us must deal with it. I am hopeful that we can move toward an understanding of energy and inscribe consumers' everyday experience of it more deeply into consumer research at least at the level of the conceptual gestalt.

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