New Hedonism

What’s happened to pleasure-seeking in the age of wellness?
Have We Had Too Much Of A Good Thing?

Hedonism: an extravagant, reckless pursuit of immediate gratification that (in some ways) sounds like the makings of an ideal consumer. But think about what that looks like and you’re probably not picturing meditation apps, no-alcohol bars or CBD. So what does hedonism look like in the age of wellness? Has it survived the remediation of pop culture, or is it doomed to haunt the empty warehouses of 90s raves gone by?

In this Crowd DNA report, we’re examining the cultural pressures acting on people and their desires. We’ll be exploring what’s driving us, and how the pursuit and politics of pleasure are changing. We take a look at the fundamentals of pleasure and how these map onto a more socially-conscious strand of indulgence, before providing tips on building a sustainable strategy in this new, morality-infused economy.

At Crowd we’re constantly figuring out what makes people tick – what they want, why they want it and what that can tell us about them. If you’d like to chat more about unpacking hedonism in the age of wellness, get in touch at hello@crowdDNA.com

Thanks for reading,

Crowd DNA
We’re the most monitored we’ve ever been. Figures in the public eye – the kind of celebrities that used to be associated with extravagance and partying – are now kept in check by their constant visibility. Surrendering control seems less appealing when you know it’ll be immortalised online – have we been muted to a point where hedonism seems impossible?

**Surveillance State**

Gen Z are called the sober generation; clubs are closing all over the world; escapism means five minutes of meditation rather than a weekend of bingeing – it seems we’ve all started to rein it in. Brands looking to sell indulgence and carefree pleasure will need to take note. But first, what’s behind this newfound sense of restraint?

**Virtue-Signalling**

Now that having a social and environmental conscience is a badge of pride, we’re thinking more about the consequences of our actions. Our hyper-visible, hyper-connected culture is all about accountability, from big brands to individuals. The selfishness inherent in traditional pleasure seeking doesn’t mesh with this new currency of virtue.

**Latitudinal Pressures**

We’re feeling the pinch like no other. People are living for longer, there are fewer options in terms of jobs for life, and purchasing a house is slipping into a fantasy. In the face of these concerns, careless abandon just doesn’t feel like an option. We’re given conflicting information about striving to live in the now, while planning for an uncertain future.

**Turbulent Times**

We’re living through disruptive and unpredictable times. Volatile political landscapes can make security and any degree of control feel impossible – so people are turning inwards. Cultural drivers are promoting self-optimisation, urging us to be deliberate, conscious, and present – not exactly conducive to hedonistic pursuits.

Have we really turned into the most saintly culture to date?
Getting to the core of what drives us

We’re living in stressful times and trying to build habits around self-improvement, ethical responsibility and comfort. But nothing changes the fact that we’re hardwired to seek out pleasure.

While their manifestations will change, the four core elements of pleasure seeking remain the same:

- **Sense**: Pleasure derived from touch, smell, sight. Eg opening a beautifully packaged delivery.
- **Social**: Pleasure derived from social interaction. Eg clothing that shows you belong to a ‘tribe’.
- **Brain/intellect**: Pleasure derived from cognitive engagement. Eg learning how to use a new app.
- **Ideals**: Pleasure linked to our ideals (these can be aesthetic, cultural, ethical). Eg buying from a sustainable brand.

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How is hedonism evolving?

These four facets of pleasure will continue to drive hedonism, even as their manifestations change. So what does pleasure seeking look like nowadays?

Short answer: it’s evolving. The narrow, Western definition of hedonism is being left behind. Contemporary culture has moved on, and what we’re seeing now is a global and inclusive version that doesn’t hinge on excess.

Over the next few pages, we take a look at how the classic big hitters of hedonism are adapting to keep up with the times.
Partying / Redefined

Decentralisation

We’ve seen club closures all round the world, and the scene is adapting by reclaiming alternate spaces. As DJ Eclair Fifi puts it: “The more clubs that close, the more the illegal scene grows; people are always going to find somewhere to do it.”

Illegal raves are nothing new; but Met police figures showed that reports of illegal raves in London alone doubled between 2016 and 17. In the past year, raves have cropped up in a Toys R Us in Hounslow, a sewer in Newcastle, and a school in Nottinghamshire.

Underground club ALL in Shanghai has become a community of artists sharing a passion for internet culture and dark electronic music, forging a futuristic, locally-driven, distinctly Chinese aesthetic. CLOSR in Beirut is turning away from the polished sheen of the city’s dominant party scene to an intense industrial clubbing experience that’s all about the music.

Underground parties are a way of reclaiming the spaces that people have been priced out of, and rejecting the rise of staged, ‘marketable’ clubbing and promotion in favour of something more authentic. We still want to cut loose – but we also want it to mean something.

Cultured Drugs

Clearly, society isn’t done with recreational drug taking. But the favoured playground of the dedicated old-school hedonist is being metabolised by the wellness ethos, and behaviour and social tolerances around it are changing. Cannabis is being legalised and CBD oil has become a staple of the wellness industry – added to drinks, sweets and even foot cream as part of a self-care routine. Rather than escape, it’s being used as a means to even more concentrated presence.

Harder drug use is being absorbed into this space too; rather than being a swift portal to transformation (or annihilation), drugs like acid are now being used in micro doses to aid concentration in hugely competitive environments.

While ‘traditional’ drug use isn’t necessarily going anywhere, attitudes around it are changing. We’re seeing festivals offering to test rather than ban drugs; usage is shifting towards safer, controlled doses, rather than being intoxicated beyond belief.

The club scene is ‘growing up’ and developing a more coherent morality, whether that’s more inclusivity, support for local artists, or the ‘honour among thieves’ style of illegal ravers. Here’s how partying is keeping the spirit of hedonism alive.
Sexuality / Redefined

We couldn’t explore hedonism without looking at sexuality. This space has seen a seismic shift from hetero-normative representation to a much more open discourse. As the gaze shifts to female and queer-centric sexuality, we’re seeing a new wave of pleasure seeking groups that had previously been excluded from the mainstream.

Female First

For women, this means shedding expectations and derogatory terms, and focusing on themselves. The new ethos is pleasure first; clubs, stores and experiences that prioritise not just women’s safety, but women’s pleasure, are popping up everywhere.

Brands like Crave and Unbound use elevated product aesthetics to reframe women’s sexuality (and bold statements to get people talking about it). Communities are forming around the promotion of female-centric sexuality; Killing Kittens is a community focused on “liberating women worldwide,” on a mission to empower women, men and couples. With even traditional big names like Durex and K-Y getting on board (with female-centric ads, and K-Y’s branded docuseries The Pleasure is Mine) sexual indulgence is being recalibrated to put women’s sexuality front and center.

Queer Culture

Caveat: we’re not suggesting that we’re in an age of total enlightenment – this certainly isn’t happening globally. But we are seeing signs of the mainstream starting to reflect the community ethos and celebration that are inherent to queer culture. The revived dating show Are You The One? features a sexually fluid cast for the first time, bringing non-heteronormative dating to the lofty heights of MTV.

One thing that queer culture and typical notions of hedonism have in common is the pursuit of pleasure in the face of societal strictures. Among Chinese youth, this is taking off exponentially. There’s a growing trend of male youth experimenting with makeup, inspired by androgynous celebs like Kris Wu and Lu Han – and highlighting how Chinese youth are redefining the conventional notions of masculinity and beauty.

Getting Real

Previously, media representation of sexuality has been a glossy affair. But hyper-polished versions of sex and sexuality (think Sex And The City) are fading out as shows like Fleabag and Sex Education hit our screens, and there’s a kind of gleeful self-indulgence in refusing to buy into the fantasy. Celebrating the reality of sexuality is more radical and hedonistic, rather than perpetuating an overly staged experience that’s far removed from reality.
Sensorial Pleasures / Redefined

ASMR

A physical sensation known as ‘brain massage’, which is triggered by placid sights and sounds like whispers and crackles. It’s driving the trend behind minute, sedative pleasure seeking; the kind of escapism you can get by plugging in your headphones while you’re sitting on the bus. The trend’s huge, and brands like Dove, Glossier and Lynx are getting involved.

Social Dining

When we think of self-indulgence, food is almost always top of the list. From the visuals of a perfectly composed plate, to the satisfaction of giving into cravings – there’s an undeniable pleasure that comes from food.

It’s also a source of social connection. In the US, the act of cooking and eating is being pulled into politics: on Queer Soup Night, LGBTQ chefs make simple food and gather people together to eat. The event is as much about community making as it is reframing the previously macho kitchen environment. In Korea, Meokbang culture – live-streaming eating a meal, aimed towards single household-occupants – is about the shared moment (including all the inconvenient sounds, chewing and pauses). Even something that seems as straightforwardly sensorial as eating is tapping into something bigger than itself.

As we’ve seen, the mindful generation is all about slowing down and focusing on the here and now. This seems anti-hedonist: how can we lose control if we’re supposed to be present in the moment? But that’s kind of the point. We’re rerouting pleasure, making it more immediate and accessible, by recognising it in minute physical sensations.

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Queer Soup Night – breaking boundaries in every dish

Cardi B getting in on the ASMR game for W Magazine

Lynx trying out ASMR advertising...

Queer Soup Night – breaking boundaries in every dish
Key Takeaways

We're still hedonists at heart – and this definitely matters for brands. We’re innate pleasure seekers. Culture will change around us, and the way we express our pursuit of pleasure will shift, but the needs themselves will remain constant. This gives you a pretty direct way to connect with your audience. Here’s a few thought starters.

--- We’re still party people

We don’t advocate micro-dosing… but we do suggest adopting the concept. Tap into the concept of micro-moments, and satisfy the need for sensorial pleasure by lifting your mood with minute boosts of audio or visual snippets.

--- Sex can still sell

– but only if its articulation is considered, nuanced, and inclusive. Be less prescriptive when working in this space. The key is to be open to everyone.

--- We’re seeking sensorial pleasures

Play with exposure and deprivation of sense receptors to keep your customer hooked. Consider your brand from a 360 perspective, to make sure you’re hitting as many receptors as possible. A good example is Nars’ immersive ‘Orgasm’ event, a pop-up of five sensory rooms that stimulated sight, touch, smell, taste and sound.

--- Know where you have the right to play

Think back to the surveillance state driver; privacy is now a commodity, and consumers are protective of it. Preserve the integrity of your brand by knowing how and where to play, and being conscious of the changing dynamics between brand and consumer.
Thanks for reading.

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore and Sydney.

Formed in 2008, operating in 60+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, strategists, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world’s most exciting brands.