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## **Faculty Working Papers**

**ROLE OF MOTIVATION RESEARCH  
IN CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY**

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**#153**

**College of Commerce and Business Administration  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**



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## ROLE OF MOTIVATION RESEARCH IN CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY

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I am not a motivation researcher and simply because I have agreed to express my views on motivation research I should not be labelled as an expert in motivation research. After I have expressed my views, I am not sure that you will still like me and respect me as a scholar and researcher in consumer behavior especially if you are an expert on motivation research. In short, my views on the relevance of motivation research in consumer psychology are not all that positive. In fact, I am somewhat surprised that special sessions are allotted to motivation research in this Seminar at a time when motivation researchers have been considered a "vanishing breed," almost extinct in the U.S.

I am sure my friends in the motivation research area have more sophisticated and interesting explanations lodged in Freudian psychoanalytical theory which can easily link my behavior of being late to some childhood problems in any one of the oral, anal, phallic phases of my early development! If this seems like a sarcastic unkind remark on motivation research, it is fully intentional. I must remind you that there are too many research studies in consumer psychology in which motivational researchers have imputed exotic meanings behind very simple facts of life and have misled numerous managers in several industries such as the automobile, durable appliances, grocery foods and packaging industries. I should also quickly point out that many of my above remarks are equally applicable to other fads promoted as scientific research in consumer psychology.

### Three Types of Motivation Research

Before you start throwing bricks and rocks at me, let me describe what I mean by motivation research. While motivation research has been given many names, some not so kind, I mean to include in it any research on consumers which is anchored to the clinical psychology and especially to Freudian thinking in clinical psychology in its explanations and methodology.



Historically, motivation research represents the first serious and systematic attempt to apply psychology to marketing at a time when marketing was dominated by economic thinking. In fact, motivation research had a very persuasive argument in the fact that consumers often did not behave logically as presumed by the economists but rather psychologically. Furthermore, just as clinical psychology concentrated on people's abnormal behavior, motivation research was considered as the only relevant means to understand the nonrational, emotional world of the consumers. Unfortunately, instead of first identifying non-rational areas of consumer behavior and limiting its applications to them, motivation research fell into the trap of presuming that all consumer behavior is nonrational or emotional and hence it is the only way to understand consumer behavior. I must add that this temptation of territorial expansion is a very normal tendency for any generalized theory in social science and is not limited to motivation research. In my opinion, it is this overzealous and sometimes indiscriminate extension of motivation research to irrelevant areas of consumption behavior which has created the crisis of relevance; in fact, the theory and methodology has come under disrepute in recent years. It is not surprising to note that there is not a single doctoral dissertation in the U. S. in marketing in the last ten to fifteen years which has been based on the clinical psychological theories as they relate to consumer behavior.

In order to examine the relevance of motivation research in consumer psychology, it is advantageous to distinguish three distinct types of motivation research practiced and promoted in consumer psychology.

The first type of motivation research includes the highly speculative, subjective and almost therapy-type qualitative research in which both the methodology and theory of psychiatry based on Freudian concepts are heavily utilized in consumer research. This includes, for example, unstructured depth interviews and nowadays focused group interviews in which consumers are encouraged to bring out all types of associations related to a product or brand. Furthermore, the verbal associations made by the consumers are interpreted and analyzed by researchers trained in clinical psychology with the use of psychoanalytic concepts. Invariably, the interpretations and analyses end up





adding surplus meanings to what consumers said, and often these "additional insights" are based on social, sexual and moral taboos presumed to exist toward the product or the brand. In short, it is presumed that the consumer's likes and dislikes are not so much based on the functional utilities of the product or the brand as on its social, sexual and moral utilities or disutilities as perceived by the consumers.

It is this first type of motivation research which has told us that (a) women get sexual arousals when wrapping Saran Wrap around a meat loaf; (b) women fantacize giving birth to a baby everytime they bake a cake; (c) men treat their automobiles as if they were their mistresses; (d) men inject considerable phallic symbols in the body style of the automobile; (e) both men and women reject prunes because they connote sterility, old age and senile outlook; and more recently (f) women motorists get sexual pleasure at the self service gasoline stations when they lift the pump nozzle and fill up the tank. Is this all really true? Only your motivation researcher knows for sure. I am, however, not sure that even the motivation researcher knows for sure because there seldom exists any consensus among a group of clinical motivation researchers about one another's interpretations.

In my opinion, the intense loyalty to Freudian psychology, wild speculations and almost qualitative nature of research which has characterized most of the first type of motivation research, have been largely responsible for the downfall of motivation research in consumer psychology. And this is a sad commentary because motivation research is useful in some areas of consumer behavior: we might have unnecessarily thrown out the baby with the bath water because the latter has been perceived to be so dirty, unclean and murky as to be not at all useful.

The second type of motivation research consists of quantitative correlational analyses between people's consumption behavior and personality profiles or syndromes measured by standard personality batteries. This type of research is not as subjective, is generally based on large samples and has much greater reliance on the quantitative measurement of the relationship between consumption behavior and clinical psychology. Some of the more widely utilized personality inventories in consumer





research include the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS), Minnesota Multiphase Personality Inventory (MMPI), Thurstone Temperament Scale and Gordon Profile.

It is this type of motivation research which has given us the following nuggets of consumer behavior wisdom: (a) extroverts prefer convertibles to sedans; (b) sociables are more fashion-conscious; (c) hypochondriacs use more selfmedicated (OTC) drugs; (d) value-oriented individuals buy economy brands; and (e) Playboy is read by sociable, emotionally stable and non-creative people. So what else is new?

A more fundamental problem with personality research in consumer behavior is that most of the correlations between personality and consumption behavior tend to be low and achieve their statistical significance due to large samples. The low covariance between personality and consumption behavior has been a major factor in the slow acceptance of personality research and eventual lack of interest among the marketing practitioners.

Despite greater scientific bent in personality research in terms of utilization of sampling theory, statistical indices and psychometric scaling procedures, there are at least three reasons which seem responsible for the moderate to weak linkage between clinical psychology and consumer psychology in this type of motivation research. First, the domain of personality theories underlying the standard personality inventories may be less relevant to consumption behavior than to clinically abnormal behavior. In other words, wholesale adoption of behavioral sciences without any thought to modifying them is less likely to prove fruitful simply because no single behavioral science can explain all social phenomena equally well. This is even a more serious problem in personality research where the clinical psychologists have openly ignored the economic and consumption behaviors of people and concentrated more heavily on interpersonal relationships. A quick check into the psychometric scales of all the major personality inventories will clearly reveal that odds are as small as one in thousand of finding a statement or scale explicitly related to economic or consumption behavior of people. How can then such inventories relate to consumer behavior when the inventories themselves have no



sampling of economic domain of people's behavior?

Secondly, the psychometric skills necessary to define and measure personality or consumption behavior are still at a primitive stage. We simply don't know enough about the measurement aspect of psychological phenomena unlike what is true in physics and mechanics. While considerable progress is made each day, we should realize the limitations of measurement instruments and concede presence of nonsampling measurement errors in our data. Unfortunately, the aura of "scientific" analysis built around the personality research in consumer psychology may have done more harm than what is realized: the poor correlations may not be due as much to lack of relationship between personality and consumption behavior as due to measurement problems on both sides of the equation.

Finally, the most serious limitation of personality research is its emphasis to directly link consumption behavior with personality syndrome. This emphasis does not allow for a number of mediating variables which often intervene between manifestation of consumption behavior due to personality motivations. These include social, economic, demographic and environmental situational variables as well as the perceptual and preference world of the individual consumer. For example, even though my personality syndrome may dictate that I should buy a Rolls Royce, the economic constraints are likely to be overwhelming. Similarly, the housewife's personality may dictate that she should prefer instant foods, the social environment may inhibit her adoption of instant foods. Unless personality profiles are mediated through a set of situational (social, economic or demographic) and psychological (perceptual or attitudinal) variables, it is likely that we will always get small positive correlations between personality and consumption behavior.

The third type of motivation research consists of heavy utilization of the methodology of clinical psychology and very little utilization of the theory. This includes projective techniques or indirect questioning methods such as word associations, sentence completion, other person characterizations, and the like. The basic presumption in this type of motivation research is that there are hidden motivations which the consumer



is conscious of, but is not likely to reveal in any direct questioning. There are too many studies in consumer behavior in which projective techniques have been relied upon. It is perhaps sufficient here to report a classical study on instant coffee in the late forties. Even though instant coffee could not be distinguished from regular coffee in blind tests, the typical stereotype negative comments for not using instant coffee were that "it tastes terrible" or that "my husband does not like it". Mason Haire designed two shopping lists which were identical except for the coffee item. One list included Nescafe Instant Coffee and the other included Maxwell House Drip Grind Coffee. The two lists were administered to a randomly split sample of housewives in which they were asked to characterize a woman who would utilize the shopping list developed in the study. In general, there were more negative comments addressed toward the woman who had Nescafe Coffee in her list than the woman who had Maxwell House Coffee. The negative comments tended to portray the Nescafe Instant Coffee user as lazy, not a good homemaker and one who does not love her husband. This indirectly revealed the negative connotations present toward instant coffee presumably resulting in its slower adoption in the market place. When I replicated the study in the late sixties utilizing almost identical shopping lists, we found virtually no differences in the comments of the two groups of housewives. Even when there were negative comments toward the instant coffee user, the housewife qualified her negative comments by giving excuses such as "she must be working", "she must be very busy", etc. for her use of instant coffee. This is not surprising to find in view of the fact that the American family structure has changed considerably in the last quarter of a century especially in regard to the role of the woman in the family and in the society.

#### What Type is Useful in Consumer Psychology?

It is my opinion that of the three types of motivation research, projective techniques as imaginative research designs will survive while the others are likely to prove much less useful in consumer psychology. Even projective techniques are not relevant in all areas of consumer behavior. In order to examine the relative contribution of motivation research to consumer psychology, let us examine different types of consumer behavior.

First, consumption behavior in general is normal behavior





and the society has a positive attitude toward greater consumption. We all respect and aspire toward a better standard of living and envy the more affluent societies. If consumption behavior is normal, it is correct to expect that people will feel free to openly talk and discuss about their consumption behavior similar to what they do about interpersonal relationships. In other words, the vast majority of consumption behavior can be openly and freely discussed. We can, therefore, assess the psychological world of the consumer by direct questioning. In all of these areas, there is no need for motivation research theory or methodology.

Second, there are some areas of consumption behavior where the personal beliefs and values are often in conflict with societal beliefs and values. What the individual behaves or would like to behave is considered not appropriate, good or correct by the society. The individual consumer can easily articulate why he behaved the way he did in a specific choice behavior situation but he is not willing to tell others perhaps because of the fear of being ridiculed or looked down on by others. Direct questioning in these areas is likely to produce at best stereotype answers or at worst deliberate disguises and rationalizations on the part of the consumer. It is in this area of consumer behavior where projective techniques and other indirect methods of questioning are most useful in consumer psychology. There are, however, methodological problems associated with projective techniques which should not be overlooked. For example, most of them require content analysis of verbal responses to a set of projective stimuli which is difficult to standardize and quantify. Fortunately, some recent methodological breakthroughs in indirect (unobstrusive) observations can be of immense help in keeping motivation research alive and kicking. One example is the use of multidimensional scaling techniques in which the consumers are asked to make simple similarity or preference judgments about products or services, and statistical attempts are made to indirectly discover the number and nature of criteria utilized by the consumers in making those judgments.

Finally, there is a small minority of consumption behavior which can be labelled as abnormal or undesirable consumption behavior. This will include all types of serious addictions



such as toward drugs, obese or compulsive consumption of foods, alcoholism and the like. A common characteristic underlying all these abnormal or undesirable consumption behaviors is the fact that the consumer probably does not behave voluntarily nor desires continuation of his consumption behavior. Probably, he does not even know why he behaves the way he does, and even if he knew, he cannot control his behavior. I think both the psychoanalytic theory and the behavior modification therapies of clinical psychology are very relevant in these areas of consumer behavior. However, it should be kept in mind that the proportion of abnormal or undesirable consumption behavior in the total domain of consumption behavior is relatively small, and therefore, the classical motivation research is only selectively relevant in consumer behavior.

#### Conclusions

Let me summarize my views on motivation research:

- a. Motivation research is not relevant to all domains of consumption behavior and, therefore, to all domains of consumer psychology. No single viewpoint is really enough to fully and adequately describe, explain and predict complex consumer behavior.
- b. It is best to drop the psychoanalytic theories underlying motivation research and rely more heavily on the methodological imaginativeness of clinical psychology.
- c. Personality research will not be useful unless we adapt it to consumption behavior by developing consumption-specific instruments. The recent development of life style scales such as the LIO scales are representative of this trend. Even when the instruments are made consumption-specific, it will be necessary to mediate personality or life style profiles through situational (social, economic or demographic) and psychological (perceptions or attitudes) variables.
- d. Motivation research in any form should be limited to those areas of consumer behavior in which the respondents are unwilling to answer directly or reveal their true feelings and in which they manifest abnormal or undesirable consumption behavior. Unfortunately, these areas of consumer behavior are not predominant nor even sizeable to justify motivation research as a unique theory or methodology in consumer behavior.











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