Why We Buy What We Buy: A Theory of Consumption Values

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This article presents a theory developed to explain why consumers make the choices they do. The theory identifies five consumption values influencing consumer choice behavior. Three representative applications of the theory are illustrated pertaining to choices involving cigarette smoking. The illustrations examined include the choice to buy or not buy (or to use or not use) cigarettes, the choice of one type of cigarette over another, and the choice of one cigarette brand over another. Results of the operationalization of the theory suggest that it may be used to predict consumption behavior, as well as to describe and explain it.

Introduction

The theory focuses on consumption values, explaining why consumers choose to buy or not buy (or to use or not use) a specific product, why consumers choose one product type over another, and why consumers choose one brand over another. The theory is applicable to choices involving a full range of product types (consumer nondurables, consumer durables, industrial goods, and services).

Description of the Theory

Three fundamental propositions are axiomatic to the theory:

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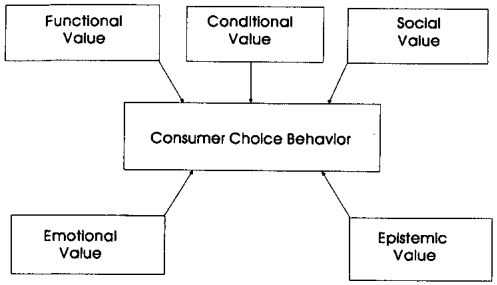

Figure 1. The five values influencing consumer choice.

1. Consumer choice is a function of multiple consumption values.
2. The consumption values make differential contributions in any given choice situation.
3. The consumption values are independent.

Multiple Values

As shown in Figure 1, the theory identifies five consumption values influencing consumer choice behavior. These are *functional* value, *social* value, *emotional* value, *epistemic* value, and *conditional* value. A decision may be influenced by any or all of the five consumption values. Various disciplines (including economics, sociology, several branches of psychology, and marketing and consumer behavior) have contributed theory and research relevant to these values.

Each consumption value in the theory is consistent with various components of models advanced by Maslow (1943, 1954, 1970), Katona (1953, 1971), Katz (1960), and Hanna (1980). Our forthcoming book by the same title cites more than 650 references to provide a flavor for the origins of these five values and for the types of research advanced relevant to each (Sheth et al., 1990).

Functional Value. The functional value of an alternative is defined as:

> The perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity for functional, utilitarian, or physical performance. An alternative acquires functional value through the possession of salient functional, utilitarian, or physical attributes. Functional value is measured on a profile of choice attributes.

Traditionally, functional value is presumed to be the primary driver of consumer choice. This assumption underlies economic utility theory advanced by Marshall (1890) and Stigler (1950), and popularly expressed in terms of "rational economic man." An alternative's functional value may be derived from its characteristics or attributes (Ferber, 1973), such as reliability, durability, and price. For example,

the decision to purchase a particular automobile might be based on fuel economy and maintenance record.

Social Value. The social value of an alternative is defined as:

> The perceived utility acquired from an alternative's association with one or more specific social groups. An alternative acquires social value through association with positively or negatively stereotyped demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural–ethnic groups. Social value is measured on a profile of choice imagery.

Choices involving highly visible products (e.g., clothing, jewelry) and goods or services to be shared with others (e.g., gifts, products used in entertaining) are often driven by social value. For example, a particular make of automobile may be chosen more for the social image evoked than for its functional performance. Even products generally thought to be functional or utilitarian (e.g., kitchen appliances) are frequently selected on the basis of their social value.

Our concept of social values has been influenced by theory and research in several related areas. Some of the more significant research has included work carried out by Warner and Lunt (1941) on social class. Products have been known to possess symbolic or conspicuous consumption value in excess of their functional utility (Veblen, 1899). Hyman (1942) pioneered research on reference groups, suggesting that individual behavior is influenced by group membership. Finally, research in the area of opinion leadership and diffusion of innovations by Rogers (1962) and Robertson (1967) has also demonstrated the importance of social values in consumer choice as a result of interpersonal communication and information dissemination.

Emotional Value. The emotional value of an alternative is defined as:

> The perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity to arouse feelings or affective states. An alternative acquires emotional value when associated with specific feelings or when precipitating or perpetuating those feelings. Emotional value is measured on a profile of feelings associated with the alternative.

Goods and services are frequently associated with emotional responses (e.g., the romance aroused by a candlelight dinner, the fear aroused while viewing a horror movie). Emotional value is often associated with aesthetic alternatives (e.g., religion, causes). However, more tangible and seemingly utilitarian products also have emotional value. For example, some foods arouse feeling of comfort through their association with childhood experiences, and consumers are sometimes said to have "love affairs" with their cars.

Emotional value has been influenced by theory and research in several pertinent areas of inquiry. Motivation research carried out by Dichter (1947) was instrumental in advancing the view that consumer choice may be driven by noncognitive and unconscious motives. Research in advertising and atmospherics has suggested that marketing and promotional mix variables arouse emotional responses that may be generalized to marketed products (Martineau, 1958; Zajonc, 1968; Kotler, 1974; Holbrook, 1983; Park and Young, 1986). Research on nonverbal processing by Paivio and Begg (1974) suggests different modes of information processing for verbal versus nonverbal inputs. Directly related to research on nonverbal processing

is a significant body of work on hemispheral brain lateralization (Orstein, 1972; Hansen, 1981) which addresses the specialized functioning of the two sides of the human brain for both verbal and visual or pictorial information.

Epistemic Value. The epistemic value of an alternative is defined as:

> The perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, and/or satisfy a desire for knowledge. An alternative acquires epistemic value by questionnaire items referring to curiosity, novelty, and knowledge.

Entirely new experiences certainly provide epistemic value. However, an alternative that provides a simple change of pace can also be imbued with epistemic value. The alternative may be chosen because the consumer is bored or satiated with his or her current brand (as in trying a new type of coffee), is curious (as in visiting a new night club), or has a desire to learn (as in experiencing another culture).

Our concept of epistemic values has been influenced by theory and in several important areas of research. Exploratory, novelty seeking, and variety seeking motives have been suggested to activate product search, trial, and switching behaviors (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Hansen, 1972; Hirschman, 1980). One of the most significant contributors to the study of optimal stimulation and arousal has been Berlyne (1960, 1970), who contends that individuals are driven to maintain an optimal or intermediate level of stimulation. Finally, innovativeness, or a consumer's propensity to adopt new products has been advanced by Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) and well discussed by Hirschman (1980).

Conditional Value. Finally, the conditional value of an alternative is defined as:

> The perceived utility acquired by an alternative as the result of the specific situation or set of circumstances facing the choice maker. An alternative acquires conditional value in the presence of antecedent physical or social contingencies that enhance its functional or social value. Conditional value is measured on a profile of choice contingencies.

An alternative's utility will often depend on the situation. For example, some products only have seasonal value (e.g., Christmas cards), some are associated with "once in a lifetime" events (e.g., a wedding gown), and some are used only in emergency situations (e.g., ambulance service). Many products have more subtle conditional associations (e.g., popcorn at the movies).

Conditional value has also been influenced by several areas of inquiry. Based on the concept of stimulus dynamism advanced by Hull (1963), Howard (1969), recognized the importance of learning that takes place as a result of experience with a given situation. Howard and Sheth (1969) then extended Howard's earlier work by defining the construct inhibitors as noninternalized forces that impede buyers' preferences. The concept of inhibitors was more formally developed by Sheth (1974) in his model of attitude–behavior relationship in the form of anticipated situations and unexpected events. Recognizing that behavior cannot be accurately predicted on the basis of attitude or intention alone, a number of researchers during the 1970s investigated the predictive ability of situational factors (Belk, 1973, 1974; Sheth, 1974; Park, 1976; Bearden and Woodside, 1977).

Differential Contributions

The five consumption values identified by the theory make differential contributions in specific choice contexts. For example, a consumer may decide to purchase gold coins as an inflation hedge (functional value), and also realize a sense of security (emotional value) from the investment. Social, epistemic, and conditional value may have little influence. In contrast, the same consumer may purchase a gold bracelet because it will be admired by those whose taste she or he respects (social value). The other four consumption values may have little influence.

Within a single product class, the brand, product type, and "buy or not buy" choices may be driven by completely different consumption values. The theory outlined here has been operationalized so that it may be determined empirically what specific consumption values in specific choice contexts can greatly enhance marketing efficiency.

Independence Among Values

The consumption values identified by the theory are independent, relating additively and contributing incrementally to choice. While it is desirable to maximize all five consumption values, it is often not practical, and consumers are usually willing to accept less of one value in order to obtain more of another (trading off less salient for more salient values).

Of course, a choice may be influenced positively by all five consumption values. For example, to a first-time home buyer, the purchase of a home might provide functional value (the home contains more space than the present apartment), social value (friends are also buying homes), emotional value (the consumer feels secure in owning a home), epistemic value (the novelty of purchasing a home is enjoyable), and conditional value (starting a family).

Application of the Theory

The theory outlined here has been operationalized and tested in more than 200 consumer choice situations. For example, the theory has been applied to "use versus do not use" choices regarding food stamps, cocaine, computer dating, and sporting events attendance; to product type choices involving automobiles (e.g., sports cars versus luxury cars); and to brand choices involving toothpaste, aspirin, and automobiles.

In operationalizing the theory, we have developed a standardized or "generic" questionnaire format, and a standardized procedure for adapting the format to the specifics associated with each unique choice situation. Thus, measurement is choice- or application-specific. The specific questions to be asked will vary from choice situation to choice situation. For example, the decision to buy or not buy a home (a "buy versus no buy" choice) involves a different set of considerations as compared with the decision to buy a condominium versus a single-family home (a product type decision).

The procedure for generating the questions begins with preliminary information from a small group of consumers sampled from the population of interest. Interviews are preferably conducted in focus group settings, and questions are asked

relevant to each of the five values in the theory. Once focus group responses have been generated, they must be converted into potential questionnaire items. Transcripts of the focus group sessions can be content analyzed, identifying responses that reflect salient concerns. Those engendering the most agreement, discussion, and enthusiasm should certainly be used. In addition to questions pertaining to each value, background data on respondents are needed for classification purposes. The final phase in the preparation of the data collection instrument is the pretest.

Once the measurement instrument is finalized, a large representative sample from the population of interest is selected and survey data are collected. The optimal sampling method depends on the nature of the application, the degree of generalizability required, and budgetary constraints. The operationalization of our theory requires that data be collected from both users and nonusers in a "buy versus do not buy" study, from users of competing brands in a brand choice study, and from users of competing product types in a product type choice study. The theory is amenable to the full range of data collection methods: mail survey, telephone interview, and personal interview (both self-administered and interviewer-administered).

Data obtained from respondents is then analyzed through discriminant analysis. Discriminant analysis is ideally suited to our theory's operationalization because analysis begins with two or more *known groups* (e.g., users/nonusers, product A users/product B users, brand A users/brand B users). In applying the theory, the objective is to classify the known groups on the basis of the consumption values driving choice. Independent variables serving as input into the discriminant model are derived through factor analysis. Factors derived represent underlying value dimensions.

The following discussion illustrates three representative applications, all pertaining to choices involving cigarette smoking. The first pertains to the choice between smoking and not smoking (a "use versus do not use" decision). The consumption values differentiating smokers and nonsmokers are examined. The second pertains to choice of product type. The consumption values differentiating smokers of filtered and nonfiltered cigarettes are explored. The third pertains to brand choice. The consumption values differentiating Marlboro smokers and Virginia Slims smokers are examined. Because cigarettes are a familiar product category, readers can assess the face validity of our findings by comparing them with their own intuition and choice values.

Use or Not Use—Smokers Versus Nonsmokers

The results of the discriminant analysis for the smokers versus nonsmokers application are summarized in Table 1. Thirteen factors were extracted in factor analysis, and seven are retained as independent variables by the stepwise discriminant procedure. As shown, *emotional value* is most influential in discriminating the smokers from nonsmokers in this study. The most discriminating factor (with a coefficient of .73) reflects the feelings of smokers: anxiety and anger when they do not smoke, and satisfaction and sexiness when they do smoke. The second most discriminating factor (with a coefficient of −.72) reflects; the feelings of nonsmokers: confidence and intelligence when they do not smoke. The next most discriminating factor ties in with the *conditional value* (with a coefficient of .37), reflecting reasons by the

Table 1. Use or Not Use—Smokers Versus Nonsmokers, Results of Stepwise Discriminant Analysis

Variable (factor description)	Coefficients Smoker/Nonsmoker	Mean Responses by Group: Smoker (n = 65)	Nonsmoker (n = 80)
Emotional Value (angry, anxious when do not smoke; satisfied, sexy when smoke)	.73	.60	−.43
Emotional Value (intelligent, confident, safe when do not smoke)	−.72	−.60	.48
Conditional Value (personal health complications, pressure from loved ones, physically threatened, concern over children's health)	.37	.61	−.40
Social Value (insecure people, people with smoking parents)	−.19	−.36	.23
Functional Value (causes heart and lung disease, annoys other people)	−.18	−.29	.17
Functional Value (Stops nervousness, helps me fit into situation, keeps me busy, is relaxing)	.17	.43	−.39
Epistemic Value (seeing advertisements, cost went down, learn more curious)	−.13	.01	−.02
		Group Means	
		1.38	−1.12

	Eigenvalue	Wilks' Lambda	Chi-Squared	DF	Significance
Stepwise model	1.56	.39	131.35	7	.0000
Full model	1.60	.38	130.50	13	.0000

smoker to stop smoking: because of personal health complications; pressure from loved ones; physical threat; or concern over childrens' health. Functional, social and epistemic values show little influence.

Table 2 provides evidence of the predictive validity of the theory. The classification analysis compares actual versus predicted smoking behavior for the respondents in this study. As shown, 91% of the respondents are correctly classified by the discriminant model. More specifically, 92% of smokers and 90% of nonsmokers are correctly classified on the basis of their values.

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The demonstrated salience of emotional value in discriminating between smokers and nonsmokers suggests strategy implications for public policy makers, organizations such as the American Lung Association, and health care providers. The findings suggest that, rather than emphasizing the health problems (negative functional value) associated with smoking, efforts to discourage smoking might more

Table 2. Use or Not Use—Smokers Versus Nonsmokers, Predictive Validity (Classification Analysis)

Actual	Predicted		Total number of Subjects
	Smokers	Nonsmokers	
Smokers	60 (92.3%)	5 (7.7%)	65
Nonsmokers	8 (10.0%)	72 (90.0%)	80

91.0% Correctly classified.

appropriately reinforce the *positive* feelings associated with *not smoking*. On the other hand, cigarette marketers seem to be fully cognizant of salient emotional values, and often emphasize them in promoting their brands.

Product Type—Filtered Versus Nonfiltered Cigarettes

Table 3 presents the results of the filtered and nonfiltered cigarette study. Fifteen factors were extracted in factor analysis, and eight are retained by the stepwise discriminant procedure. As indicated, the two most discriminating factors are *functional value* (coefficient = .65) and *social value* (coefficient = .59), reflecting the thinking of the filtered cigarette smoker. The functional value spells out several rational reasons for smoking filtered cigarettes: to prevent tobacco from getting in the mouth; because it is mild tasting; because it prevents the cigarette from sticking to the lips; and to reduce the tar and nicotine intake. The social value reflects groups of people believed most likely to smoke filtered cigarettes: young women; athletes; beginning smokers; young people; and health conscious people. Other factors have considerably less influence.

As shown in Table 4, 90% of respondents are correctly identified, indicating good predictive validity. The lower predictive accuracy associated with the nonfiltered cigarette smokers sample is almost certainly a function of the smaller sample size. In turn, the smaller sample size reflects the product's lesser popularity.

If these preliminary findings were generalized to the entire cigarette market, parties hoping to influence choice between filtered and nonfiltered product types should emphasize salient functional concerns and social associations. Furthermore, epistemic value might be emphasized as a secondary appeal. In contrast, appeals to emotional value and conditional value do not appear warranted.

Brand Choice—Marlboro Versus Virginia Slims

Finally, Table 5 presents the results of the study involving Marlboro vs. Virginia Slims smokers. Thirteen factors were extracted in the factor analysis, and only two are retained as independent variables by the stepwise procedure. As indicated, *social value* literally *overwhelms* the other values in this application. The dominant factor (coefficient = .93) associates the Marlboro brand with "outdoorsmen," "blue collar workers," "cowboys," and "men." The factor also disassociates the brand from "women," "sophisticated women," and "rich people." The only other variable that entered into the model is from the *emotional value* domain (coefficient = −.29), and it reflects feelings of being in a higher class and femininity expressed by the Virginia Slims smoker.

As shown in Table 6, 96% of respondents are correctly classified (93% of Marl-

Table 3. Product Type—Filtered Versus Nonfiltered, Results of Stepwise Discriminant Analysis

Variable (factor description)	Coefficients Filtered/Nonfiltered	Mean Responses by Group: Filtered (n = 63)	Mean Responses by Group: Nonfiltered (n = 29)
Functional value (prevents tobacco in mouth, mild tasting, prevents sticking to lips, reduces tar and nicotine intake)	.65	.50	−.99
Social value (young women, athletes, beginning smokers, young people, health conscious people)	.59	.47	−.95
Epistemic value (wanted to know what it was like, curious)	−.28	−.12	.23
Epistemic value (friend smoked them, recommended by friend)	.24	.17	−.11
Functional value (hazardous to health, turns teenth yellow)	.24	.08	−.02
Functional value (full tobacco taste, gives most from each cigarette)	−.21	−.19	.24
Social value (truck drivers, working class men, beer drinkers, outdoorsmen)	−.21	−.21	.28
Functional value (harsh on throat, causes yellow fingers, helps me eat less)	−.19	−.16	.11
		Group Means: .87	−1.88

	Eigenvalue	Wilks' Lambda	Chi-Squared	DF	Significance
Stepwise model	1.67	.37	84.37	8	.0000
Full model	1.71	.37	82.10	15	.0000

Table 4. Product Type—Filtered Versus Nonfiltered, Predictive Validity (Classification Analysis)

Actual	Predicted		Total Number of Subjects
	Filtered	Nonfiltered	
Filtered	58 (92.%)	5 (7.9%)	63
Nonfiltered	4 (13.8%)	25 (86.2%)	29

90.2% Correctly classified.

Table 5. Brand Choice—Marlboro Versus Virginia Slims, Results of Stepwise Discriminant Analysis

Variable (factor description)	Marlboro/ Virginia Slims	Mean Responses by Group: Marlboro (n = 70)	Mean Responses by Group: Virginia Slims (n = 46)
Social value (outdoorsmen, blue collar, cowboys, men)	.93	.75	−1.17
Emotional value (in a higher class, feminine)	−.29	−.46	.81
		Group Means	
		1.67	−2.53

	Eigenvalue	Wilks' Lambda	Chi-Squared	DF	Significance
Stepwise model	4.30	.19	188.40	2	.0000
Full model	4.46	.18	182.47	13	.0000

boro smokers and 100% of Virginia Slims smokers). Thus, the theory demonstrates excellent predictive validity in this application.

The gender-based associations evidenced suggest that the social imagery communicated by Marlboro and Virginia Slims advertising has been internalized by consumers. Sex role identification is entrenched and appears as a primary driver of brand choice. Thus, the findings suggest that extraordinary effort would be required for Marlboro to appeal to women or for Virginia Slims to appeal to men. Furthermore, it might be almost as challenging for Marlboro to attract men identifying with a more urban and less rugged image or for Virginia Slims to attract women not identifying with a sophisticated image.

Conclusion

Our purpose in advancing and operationalizing a theory of consumer choice values is (1) to contribute to the general understanding of consumer choice behavior, and (2) to assist practitioners, policy makers, and academic researchers in determining what motivates specific choices. The theory has been operationalized and tested in more than 200 applications, and has consistently demonstrated excellent predictive validity. Thus, the theory may be used to *predict* consumption behavior, as well as to *describe* and *explain* it. The theory may be applied to any consumer choice situation of interest, with the limitation that the context is one of individual

Table 6. Brand Choice—Marlboro Versus Virginia Slims, Predictive Validity (Classification Analysis)

Actual	Predicted: Marlboro	Predicted: Virginia Slims	Total Number of Subjects
Marlboro	65 (92.9%)	5 (7.1%)	70
Virginia Slims	0	46 (100.0%)	46

95.7% Correctly classified.

decision making (as opposed to dyadic or group choice), systematic decision making (as opposed to random or stochastic choice), and voluntary decision making (as opposed to mandatory or involuntarily "choice").

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