

ABSTRACT

TOWARD A PHYSIOPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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In taking stock of the current theoretical foundation in the discipline of consumer behavior, recently several authors have arrived at one overriding common conclusion that neither sociologists nor psychologists have provided a viable paradigm for the study of consumer and consumptive behavior.

Some investigators have sought to study consumer behavior at a social, psychological, or socio-psychological level. These approaches have proven inadequate, at least from pedagogical standpoint, for the main reason that the current models have attempted to explain consumer motivation and behavior based only on afferent input (carrying external stimulus information toward the central nervous system).

An important "key area" has been neglected. The more recent, emerging view is that the effects of stimulation or motivation on behavior must be understood as an interaction between stimulus objects in the environment and a particular physiological state of condition of the organism (i.e., the consumer).

Although much of the individual's consumptive behavior is motivated by environmental, social, psychological stimuli, a vast number of times behavior is also motivated from internal conditions, namely physiological processes which are related to behavioral states. Often the most accurate measuring of products and services is conveyed by having the consumer experience them personally, such as through sampling (e.g., by eating a slice of salami offered by a friendly product demonstrator at a supermarket). How can we explain purchase behavior had the shopper bought some of this product other than through social or psychological influences exerted by this comely demonstrator or through the concept of "satisfaction" after purchase, which is a feedback information (again an afferent input) and does not explain or incorporate the internal (bloodborne) input resulting from physiological changes due to the initial act of the sampling experience? A process such as this example is not amenable to purely social or psychological explanation. To bridge this gap, we have to resort to physiological psychology findings.

Although research in areas embodied by physiological psychology has been taking place since the 1800's, it has only been within the past fifty years, with the development of neuroelectrical technology, that scientists have been able to make fine-grain analysis of brain and nervous system structure and function. Thus, there is a huge body of knowledge already accumulated in this field which needs to be synthesized and integrated into our perspectives on consumer behavior.

In this paper an attempt is made to incorporate the physiological aspects of the consumer in explaining consumption behavior. The assumption underlying the proposed model is that the unit of analysis is the individual consumer whose behavior is also controlled by physiological processes. For students of consumer psychology, the justification for learning about physiology comes through demonstrating that such knowledge increases our understanding of how important

behavioral processes can be influenced. Explaining consumer behavior, thus, would involve the examination of the individual's two interacting systems. The first system is the psychological aspect and the second system is the physiological dimension of consumer behavior.

The proposed model, has five major components (afferent input, physio-psychological information processing, decision process, environmental forces, and output).

Essentially, the nature of the model can be described in the following ways:

1. It is a stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model.
2. It is homeostatic and morphogenic model (i.e., the consumer is constantly trying to maintain and/or attain a higher level of internal balance with the environment for coping with the requirements of various needs).
3. It accounts for subliminal stimulus processing.
4. It accounts for low and high involvement stimuli processing.
5. It is a model of consumer's rational/emotional choice decisions, and
6. Finally, it accounts for physiological processing of information.

Although, the proposed model may seem akin to that of Howard and Sheth's, the similarity lies in format and choice of some variables. However, there are three major differences. First, while the Howard-Sheth model concentrates only on rational brand choice decisions, the suggested model, in addition to that accounts for subception and emotional choice decisions. Second, the Howard-Sheth model presents first perceptual constructs for information processing whose results would be "input" to the learning constructs, whereas this model adopts the individual's cognitive structure as the information processing unit (an input) to facilitate perception of the incoming stimulus. Finally, while Howard-Sheth model is largely a psychological abstraction drawn upon learning theories, this model is based on physio-psychological underpinning of consumer/consumption behavior.