

Symbolic and Affective Motivations Involved in the Purchase Decisions of Consumers

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Abstract: The psychological motivations of consumers' purchases have started to gain more and more attention from various researchers from psychology to sociology and economy. Yet there are many steps needed for the progress of the understanding this less rational part of the consumers' choices. This paper aims to identify in the literature a theoretical model that could be further used in identifying and measuring the affective and symbolic motivations for the Romanian consumers. For this purpose we studied literature from social psychology that is of interest for economic and business studies, and we have identified the model of Dittmar (2008) as a suitable framework for our purpose. We further found some empirical applications of this model that encourage its application in empirical testing, and also provide interesting insights on consumers.

Keywords: consumer behavior; symbolic motivations; affective motivations; purchase decisions

JEL Classification: M30; M31; M39

1 Introduction

The difficult economic context in today's global world is a starting point for the rise of new and old unanswered questions about consumer behavior and its changes. The current consumption evolution asks for new analysis and better understanding of its reasons and change mechanism, especially from the perspective of its consequences to the economic and social development, as well as the environment. It is more and more obvious that the consumption patterns changed and the recent concern of the consumers on their own decisions and budget limits have drawn the marketers to try to adapt their strategies to this new reality. As well, it seems necessary that some assumptions on consumer behavior are re-analyzed, especially regarding their bounded rationality and the role played by emotional aspects in the decision process. Notwithstanding, some concepts offered by sociology and psychology seem of greater importance in this context,

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like the social construction of the individual identity and the “social conversations” in which consumers are involved when buying and using a material good or a service (Jackson, 2005).

The debate on bounded rationality of consumers and the emotional component of choices is quite old, as well as aspects related to identity, but these concepts were viewed most of the time as separate, even contrary, omitting the relations between them at human being level. In fact the basic preconception is that consumer behavior is essentially based on purpose and rational, as opposed the expressive behaviors seen by many as unmotivated, thus lacking a purpose as A. H. Maslow (2007) states. Yet, in the contemporary society many of us use the goods they purchase for expressive purposes, which are mainly unconscious. Leaving out this part of the purchase and consumption process will only diminish our knowledge and understanding in important issues for the economic evolution as well as for the evolution of the society. The fact that the research trying to link this rational, emotional and identity-related components of consumption is insufficient becomes obvious especially when trying to explain rationally the consumption behavior that led to the current economic crisis, when public policies are trying to change consumption behavior to a more sustainable one for the environment, or when researchers try to explain the lack of well-being and life satisfaction in countries where freedom of choice and consumption is part of the daily life for many decades.

The aim of this paper is to identify a theoretical model that connects the rational, emotional and identity-related motives of purchase that could be further applied on Romanian car consumers. We have chosen the car market and car consumers in order to study these aspects for several reasons. First, there is a common assumption that Romanian consumers buy cars for emotional and symbolic reasons, as a BMW sales representative said during an in-depth interview study: “Romanian consumer may suffer for its car, but he owns a BMW” (Ariton, 2012). But this assumption has never been tested empirically. Secondly, the existing research has shown that emotional and symbolic reasons of purchase are more frequent for some types of goods, and that there are gender differences on the importance of these purchase motives according to the type of good. Dittmar (2008a) has shown that women are more inclined to emotional and symbolic purchase motives when we talk about clothes, and states that men are more inclined to these motives for good like tools. Yet, this second part still needs to be tested empirically.

The way how these three types of motives, instrumental, emotional and identity related, influence the decision process of car purchase can provide important insights to the car industry, but also to businesses connected to this industry such as financial institutions and insurers. On the other hand, we would say that these insights are even more important to consumers themselves as understanding their

unconscious reasons and automatic choices can only improve their ability to take the best decision and be satisfied afterwards.

2 The Model of the Psychological Functions of Material Possessions

Material goods are involved in a series of psychological functions, such as offering them control, independence, pleasure and emotional security (Dittmar, 2008a). There are many material goods that are practical instruments that ease our life, making it more controllable and comfortable. For example a car is basically a mean of transportation, that gets us from point A to B. Yet, in addition to this instrumental and practical meaning, there is evidence that possessions play a profound role for us, as they answer a whole set of different psychological functions.

Such symbolic links between material goods and identity are frequently used in advertising, and there is enough literature in the area of consumer behavior on the link between the product and self-harmony, or the goods characteristics and self-conception of the consumers (Sirgy et al., 1997; according to Solomon, Bamossy, & Askegaard, 2002). Almost all the time, advertising highlights that “you, that you are now” are less than “you, the one you wish to be” (Richins, 1991), leading to the claim that marketing does increase consumers self-discrepancies and discontentment towards the present.

People perceive and live the material possessions as integral parts of their self, and this shows that identity has an influence beyond the physical body. The psychological explanations for this close link between possessions and the self, split in two different areas. On one hand, their instrumental functions are enhanced, especially when they help individuals exert control over the external environment, and on the other hand, their symbolic functions are highlighted, when objects represent inter-personal relations, emotional comfort, belonging to a group and a whole series of personal characteristics, values and beliefs.

The conception that individuals use material symbols in order to enhance a certain aspect of their identity is part of the Theory of Symbolic Self-Completion, which suggests that people use material possessions with the aim to compensate the perceived inconsistencies in their own self-conception (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Due to the communication ability, material symbols can be used in identity creation and in enhancing it. Under certain limits, we can try to get closer to our ideal conception of ourselves by getting involved in the symbolic self-completion.

The psychological functions filled by material possessions have mainly been examined through qualitative research, using the “preferred possessions paradigm”, which requests the respondents to choose the most appreciated personal possessions and then to explain in their own words why those objects are so

important to them (Dittmar, 2008a). Other researches that have used the same paradigm have analyzed the individual stories in order to develop coding categories that summarize the reasons for which possessions are important for individuals (e.g. Kamptner, 1991; Richins, 1991). The resulting categories differ in number and degree of detail, but tend to suggest a series of psychological functions with small differences among them.

The integrative model in Figure 1 offers a hierarchical map of the main types of psychological functions filled in by material possessions, that Dittmar (2008a) identified in content analysis open ended stories, in questionnaire based studies (Dittmar, Beattie & Friese, 1996) and in-depth interviews (Dittmar & Drury, 2000). The model firstly make a distinction between the instrumental and functional use of goods, in order to increase the efficiency of daily activities and to exert control over the environment, on one hand, and their symbolic use as expression mean of own identity, on the other hand.

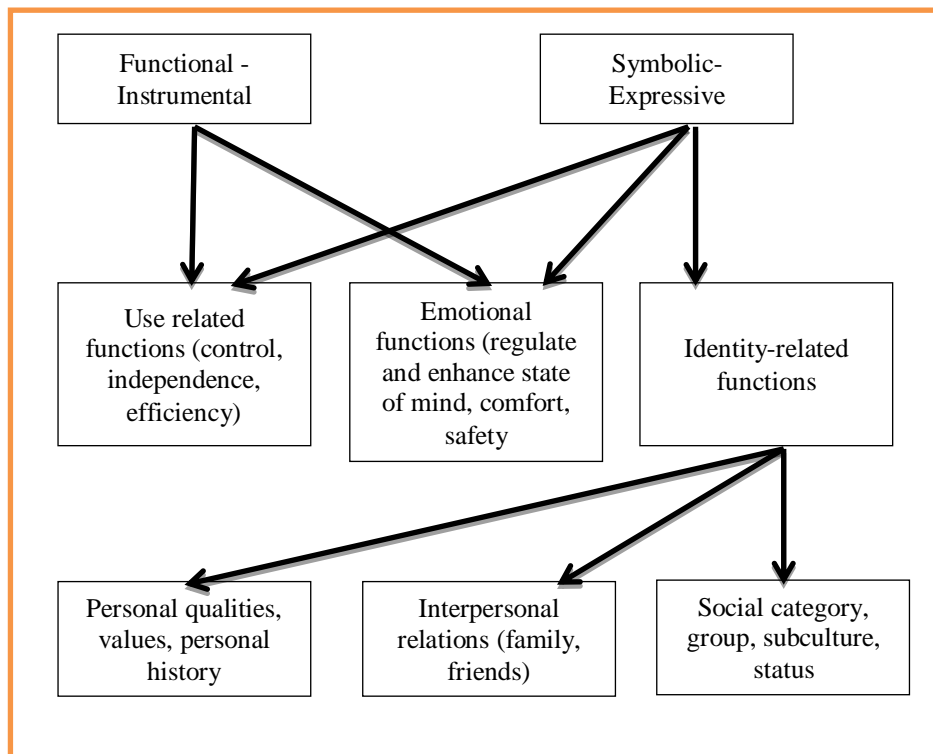


Figure 1. The integrative model of psychological functions of material goods

Source: (Dittmar, 2008)

At the next subordinate level in this hierarchy, possessions have utility and emotional functions, that come from both superior levels, instrumental and

symbolic. If we take the example of a car, the meaning referring to its usage combines its functionality as an instrument which enables transportation with the fact that for its owner it symbolizes freedom, independence and even sex-appeal.

In a similar way, people use material goods with the purpose to feel better and enhance certain emotions, but the fact of enhancing the state of mind and the emotional comfort are not connected solely the usage characteristics of those goods. It is also related to their capacity to symbolize positive aspects of identity, like an effective self, closer to the ideal self, or a stronger feeling of belongingness to the group of significant others.

The predominantly symbolic functions of possessions can be further subdivided. First as symbols of category: signs of the social identity which enables people to express their social position, wealth and status, and symbolizes the belongingness to a group. Secondly, possessions symbolize special relations with certain individuals, presents and family objects being good examples for such a case. Thirdly, they are also symbols of self-expression and work like marks of personal identity. They represent an instant picture of the personal history and memories, giving individuals a sense of continuity of the self. They can represent unique qualities of a person, its values and attitudes.

3 Results of the Previous Application of the Theory of the Meaning of Material Possessions

There are several studies that have tried to test empirically the model proposed by Dittmar, on different contexts and considering some parts of it, especially. In this section we will present the main findings of two studies we considered of interest for our future research. One is a study on car use in the Netherlands, which wants to identify if the model of Dittmar is testable empirically, and examine the affective and symbolic motives of car use, along with the instrumental ones. The second study is proposed by Dittmar and her colleagues and we consider of interest for testing the fact that the occurrence of psychological motives is related to the good purchased, the gender of the consumer as well as the context of shopping. Thus it provides a bigger picture for using the model of the meaning of material possessions in understanding the influence it can have in purchase situations.

The purpose of the work of Linda Steg (2005) is two folded, firstly it investigates the main categories of motives for car use that can be identified empirically and secondly it analyses if Dittmar's model can be validated by empirical results. The importance of the three types of motives, instrumental, affective and symbolic, can differ from one group of people to another. Thus, the individual differences were studied (differences among demographic groups) concerning the evaluation of the motives of car use. For this purpose, they have used data from two previous

empirical studies on the instrumental and symbolic functions of using the car, that has used different research methods, as well as different measurements for the relevant variables, in order to test the validity of the findings.

These results suggest that respondents make a clear distinction between instrumental and affective-symbolic motives in car usage and in addition, independency seem to be another reason. Based on these results Linda Steg has built three new variables reflecting the different factors that determine the attractiveness of car use (affective-symbolic aspects, instrumental aspects and independency), by computing the mean scores of the items with the highest correlational score, $>.40$ for one of the factors.

Secondly, Steg (2005) has tested the model of the meaning of material possessions of Dittmar. This time, she has used a deductive approach, in order to investigate whether car usage actually fulfills instrumental and affective-symbolic functions. A confirmatory factor analysis has revealed that instrumental and affective functions of car usage can be clearly distinguished, that is the items correlated more with the scale they belonged to, on theoretical basis.

The study of Dittmar (2008b) has the aim to identify if the psychological motives of purchase, emotional and symbolic, become more important according to the type of good, context of purchase and gender of the consumer, leading to more impulse purchases.

The purchase motives examined in the study of Dittmar (2008b) refer to the functional, emotional, social and identity concern. Several researchers have focused on the dimensions of purchases – motives and perspectives in the purchase process – with the aim to analyze and understand consumer behavior, researching aspects like utility versus hedonic values (Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994), or the economical, recreational and social dimension of purchases (Bergadaa, Faure, & Perrien, 1995). The previous studies reveal two main dimensions of purchases: on one hand, the functional concerns, like utility and received value for the price paid, and, on the other hand, emotional and social factors like recreation and the benefit of social interactions enabled by shopping. But these motives leave apart the consumer's concern with constructing his own identity, in spite of the evidence quite consistent that consumers are motivated to buy good as symbols for what they are or what they would like to be. Benson (2006) makes the suggestion that expressing the identity and searching for a better self through consumption products are some essential features of the contemporary consumption. In a series of studies conducted in UK, Dittmar et al (2008a) have used several scales for measuring the purchase motives, and respondents have evaluated how important were for them, personally, the different motives, for different product categories. Each respondent has given multiple scores for each purchase reason. The first two items have focused on functional concerns – “a good quality-price”, “useful and

practical”, while the third item has evaluated the degree to which people have bought goods because “they provide a good state of mind”, reflecting the emotional benefit. The last three items have measured the concerns towards identity: the degree to which people buy good in order to express what they are (how different they are from the others) to get closer to the type of person they wish to be or in order to emphasize the social image (the social status).

Thus, Dittmar (2008b) have identifies three main dimensions of the purchase motives. In addition to the economic (instrumental) motives, there are two more main sets of non-functional dimensions of purchases corresponding to different motivational elements, that is emotional and identity-related benefits. Of course, that knowing that psychological motives are significant is important, yet this is only the starting point for addressing new questions, more interesting, on the type of person most strongly influenced by these motives as well as the type of context that makes them prominent. The study of Dittmar (2008b) examines the way in which the feminine and masculine genders are differently influenced by the purchase motives and by the type of good, considering also the impulse purchases as in interesting context.

Gender differences have been noticed also in previous research, women having a stronger involvement for acquisitions then men (Bergadaa et al., 1995), especially concerning the recreational and social dimensions of purchases, while men have seen greater scores for feelings like apathy to purchases. Dittmar & Drury (2000) have found in a study based on in-depth interviews that purchases seem to have a stronger psychological and emotional role for women, then for men, concerning the consumption goods, other than the routine shopping for household maintenance. Dittmar et al (2008a) also finds that women have especially positive attitudes towards shopping, associating them with recreation, while men tend to have negative attitudes, seeing shopping as a work they wish to accomplish with a minimum of time and effort. This involves the fact that women concentrate usually on the purchase process (most of the time pleasant) and men concentrate on the result: getting the actual good with the lowest involvement.

On the other hand, the authors argue that this general tendency could be stronger or even reversed for certain types of goods, like tools, digital equipment, bought predominantly by male consumers. Apart from these exceptions, Dittmar (2008b) suggests that it would be plausible that, in general, purchasing consumption goods is a more integral part of the personal and social identity of women, at least from the traditional gender identity perspective (Fischer & Gainer, 1991), playing, thus, a stronger emotional, psychological and symbolic role then for men, whose personal and social identity is less related to the purchase processes of consumption goods, at least from the traditional perspective. The consumption activity is also important for men, but they are more concerned with obtaining the right good, usually expensive and unique, like a car, that would denote a high social status.

Altogether, these arguments lead to the expectation that gender differences have a relative importance for the three main sets of purchase motives identified: functional aspects would be more important for men, while social-emotional and identity motives stronger for women. Dittmar (2008b) highlights the fact that gender differences should not be understood as picturing the essential differences in character between feminine and masculine consumers. She suggests that purchases will probably remain different as mentioned earlier according to gender only the time when women and men will continue to internalize the socio-cultural norms and the common social representations that shopping is differently connected to the social, personal and gender identities of women and men.

4 Conclusion

The model of the meaning of material possessions is a theoretical model that was empirically tested and can be used in identifying the different types of psychological functions accomplished by goods. This can be a good model used in identifying the presence and importance of several types of motives on the same consumer good. Yet, this stage needs a further step that is to integrate this concept on goods under a behavioral model that could tell us the way in which a bigger or smaller importance of psychological motives influences the purchase process and final decision.

The study of Dittmar (2008b) starts testing the effects of these psychological functions of goods on a certain purchase contexts aiming to identify whether their presence can determine more impulse purchases and more regretted decisions later. These psychological functions are also present in durable goods, like cars, as we have seen in Steg's (2005) study and they probably have an influence on the purchase decision. It will only need to be tested.

Considering now the context of the Romanian car consumer, that we want to focus on in a further research, we could easily say that these psychological motives are present, but they have never been measured. It will be interesting to find out how important each of them is, in certain brand more than in others or for some personal characteristics present in some consumers. Of course, this will need to be related to the purchase process that has followed, in order to identify those influences that we were speaking about. A further reason would also be the fact that the model has only been tested in western European countries, with a long tradition in choosing products freely in the market, and who are typically considered more pragmatic than Balkanic or Mediterranean people.

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