A Two Consumer Tale – Valerie Braithwaite

Consumerism I am interpreting as meaning using goods or services – from buying food to enrolling in a cooking course, from buying a car to flying to Bali, from buying running gear to paying gym fees. I am also assuming consumerism involves money transfers, competition to sell products, and consequently advertising. When I think of consumption, and unnecessary consumption, that is the system that comes to mind. So why do we enter such a system as consumers? How do we opt out?

This image from Michael Salmon that I re-possessed from my children and hangs in my study at home captures the heart of what I want to say. There are well adjusted easy going folk who are open to the world and all its charms, and while resistant to interference are basically good hearted souls who can be persuaded to try something different – as long as they are treated kindly and respectfully.

And there are those, and I am going to suggest that all of us have this dark side to some degree, who are hunkered down in our caves, unable to focus on anything beyond our immediate feelings, digging ourselves further and further into the darkness.

And this is how I see the psychological work relevant to consumption – it addresses each of these gestalts of human beings.

Let's start with theories about the easy going folk and the key concepts that have underpinned most discussions of our advertising in the past half century. All of these theoretical perspectives summarised in Table 1 below rely on a kind of psycho-logic. In other words, these theories make sense for a reasonable person who wants to maintain some consistency in how they think and act and at the same time want to fit into society.

Briefly, the theory of planned behaviour, which is an elaboration of Martin Fishbein's theory of reasoned action, identifies attitude, personal control, and the norms that a person sees operating as guiding us toward a behavioural intention. That intention, along with continuing confidence that it can be done, leads to behavioural change. In other words, I look at going for a cruise down the Danube (positive attitude), I know I can do that (control), I see my friends doing that (social norms), I decide I am going to do it (behavioural intention), no ASSA workshops are in my diary (nothing to disrupt my control), so off I go (behaviour). There are many applications of this approach in the health and environment fields.

Table 1
Psycho-logic approaches

Theory of planned behaviour/reasoned action	Martin Fishbein, Icek Ajzen	Attitude (+ or -ive) to object, perceived control, subjective norms, behavioural intention, behaviour
Social cognitive learning theory	Albert Bandura	Observational learning of goals, pathways and self-efficacy
AMP (regulatory environmental application)	Honig et al.	Awareness, motivation, pathways

Needs	Abraham Maslow	survival and safety, love and belonging, and esteem and self-actualization
Values	Scott, Morris, Rokeach, Braithwaite integration analysis	security, order and status, humanistic and expressive concerns for others, personal accomplishments, and religiosity and personal restraint versus pleasure

The second approach comes out of learning theory and is most authoritatively captured in the work of Albert Bandura. For Bandura, cognitions, that is thinking through our behaviour, was to become an important part of his theorising, but his first insight was that imitation was a critical part of learning how to act in different contexts. Under Bandura's influence, we realised that we learnt not just by the rewards and punishments we received when we tried things, but we learnt through observing others, observational learning. We think about the goals that we see people strive for - do they suit us, the abilities involved in achieving those goals - do we have them, and the steps they put in place or the pathways that they use to be successful and efficiently achieve their goal.

Goals, personal efficacy and pathways or strategies to accomplish goals have proven useful concepts to environmental scientists trying to change corporate behaviour. Clifford Shearing and his colleagues in Capetown use a variation of Bandura's theory in their AMP model which they use to convince corporations to invest in actions that are more environmentally responsible. A stands for awareness of problems and possibilities, M stands for being motivated to respond in some environmentally responsible way to overcoming problems and P stands for the pathways, how it can be done.

In Bandura's model and in AMP, the core concepts are finding a goal that one can commit to and one feels empowered enough to achieve (control, personal efficacy) and then finding the pathways to delivering on that goal (observational learning and innovation). So our goal may be to use less water, we may feel capable of doing that, and then we may look for ways for saving water and recycling water. Bandura's social cognitive learning model is useful in many new regulatory contexts where there is probably reasonable agreement on goals but a fair degree of uncertainty about how to implement the regulations.

So where do our consumer choices and preferences come from, be they harmful or gentle on the environment. Mostly reference is made to background needs and values: both biological and learnt. The objects and goals that marketers draw to our attention are linked with widely shared human needs and values. Abraham Maslow's needs hierarchy provides a well-known, widely used and succinct depiction of human needs. Whether you believe in a hierarchy or not, the categories of needs are recognisable and reasonably comprehensive: (1) survival and safety (food, clothing and shelter – covers a lot of advertising), (2) love and belonging (advertisements for food, clothing and shelter often offer these too), and (3) esteem and self-actualization (Maslow's higher order needs). Advertisements offer fulfilment of high order needs through depicting their product as status symbols, special skills that are personally rewarding, or as the means to enhanced self-knowledge and happiness.

Values are the socially shared principles that guide our actions – manifestations of our best selves. They are important, not because we always behave in accordance with our values, but when we consider our hopes for the future, values play a large part in determining what appeals to us, particularly when marketers attach them to goods and services. There are as many values frameworks as there are needs frameworks, but they can be reduced down to four priority areas that we share and defend in institutionally contentious contexts: (1) security, order and status recognition, (2) humanistic and expressive concerns for others, (3) personal accomplishments, and (4) religiosity and personal restraint versus pleasure and independence.

Of course we do not think the same, want the same things, need the same things, observe the same things and learn the same things. We are also not equal in the pathways we can access to consume and achieve the outcomes we want. Marketers deal with this through segmentation of the market. We also segregate ourselves through our group identifications – who we are like and who we are unlike. The power of groups with which we identify to persuade us to act in certain ways is the subject of social identity and self-categorisation theories (Turner, Tajfel). In all of the theories discussed so far, we are selective in who will influence us and from whom we learn.

One concept that is common to all of these accounts of how we may be influenced as consumers is efficacy, belief in our capacity to act to achieve certain outcomes.   We choose, we achieve, we have efficacy, even if that achievement is not so rewarding as we might have imagined at the outset. Our efficacy is not so much reduced in such situations, with practice and evidence that we can shape our future it increases.

So is this the answer to our excessive consumerism – revise goals, build efficacy and pursue these more environmentally sustainable goals along new pathways? Surely that is part of the answer. Education that makes us aware of where excessive consumerism is leading, collectively setting goals for changing behaviour (use more renewable energy and save on energy), making those goals achievable and making the pathways as rewarding as we can. At a more individual micro level we might invest in op shops for clothes and furniture, shared communal gardens for food production, cooperatives for swaps and trades on used goods - and all these things are happening. Media spreads the word – television programs such as the Waste, the Check-out, and Gruen Transfer are among the mass media conveyors of information and ideas.

But this story I am telling is similar to how we started with climate change and it really did not get us far enough quickly enough. Denial and fear, mistrust and no practical pathways for enough people to action have all simply created a huge gulf between people and their democratically elected governments, and between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged. There is a dark side to our natures in this time of need to pull together to save the planet. When we turn our attention to consumerism, how then do we respond to the dark side of ourselves that binges on television series, eats chocolate and chips to the point of nausea, drinks ourself into a state of oblivion, or spends the night shopping on the internet?

The literature on recovery from addiction is one place to start. A review of factors that consistently emerged in the scientific literature as being involved in successful recovery were captured by the acronym, CHIME: connectedness, hope and optimism, identity, meaning in life and empowerment. We have covered connectedness, identity and empowerment in the discussions to date, but less so hope and optimism and meaning in life.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi addresses this very question calling these experiential needs that are quite different from Maslow's existential needs. The essence of Csikszentmihalyi's thinking is that we are not hard wired for boredom and for having nothing to do. This is a negative experiential state and bad for our mental health. We need a focus for our psychic energy: "we have a need … to keep consciousness in an organized state, focused on some activity that requires attention" … He goes on to suggest that "The experiential need to keep consciousness tuned is responsible for a great deal of consumer behaviour." (p.270).

Csikszentmihalyi argues that shopping and surrounding ourselves with possessions is an easily accessed course of action for making us feel we are doing something worthwhile. We do this when we are bored, or too tired to work but not tired enough to sleep. He then goes on to review a body of evidence that shows that the effects of shopping and having more possessions are not long lasting in terms of lifting our psychological well-being. Furthermore, active involvement in a challenging task gives more happiness than passively consuming goods and entertainment. He concludes that what we need is a new economy:

"Craftspersons, chefs, athletes, musicians, dancers, teachers, gardeners, artists, healers, poets – these are the workers creating goods that increase human well-being without degrading the complexity of the world. Is it impossible to develop an economy based on a majority of workers of this kind? Where consumption involves the processing of ideas, symbols, and emotional experiences rather than the breakdown of matter?" (p. 271)

If Csikszentmihalyi is right, the main point of intervention for reducing excessive consumerism is similar to the main point of intervention suggested in the more standard psychological theories of behaviour change listed above. The efficacy of people needs to be enhanced. This change at an individual level, however, requires massive shifts in our institution's priorities: institutions of education, work and politics. Attention needs to refocus on meeting the suite of needs of human beings rather than using human beings to sure up our somewhat antiquated institutions.

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