

THE
PSYCHOLOGY
OF
CONSUMER
BEHAVIOR

• **BRIAN MULLEN** • **CRAIG JOHNSON** •

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For Terry and Sophie
and
For Curtis and Elaine

Preface

As conveyed in the title, this book presents an overview of theory and research on the psychology of consumer behavior. After several years of studying, teaching, talking about, and engaging in consumer behavior, we have tried to bring together a representative and broad survey of small answers to the big question: “Why do consumers do what they do?”

It should be recognized that there are at least three different types of books about consumers. One type of textbook about consumers is devoted to an attempt to manipulate and influence consumers’ use of products, goods, and services. Another type of textbook about consumers is devoted to an attempt to protect, and to serve as an advocate for, consumers in their interactions with producers in the marketplace. The third type of textbook about consumers is devoted to an attempt to understand the behavior of consumers. It is this third type of textbook that the reader is holding now.

Our goal has been to provide a broad, accessible presentation of current theory and research as it illuminates fundamental issues regarding consumer behavior. The goal of understanding may seem less ambitious than either the goal of influencing consumers or the goal of protecting consumers. However, as the reader delves into the research literature of consumer psychology, it should become apparent that the task of understanding consumer behavior is not a simple task. In addition, there is always the distinct possibility that an improved understanding of consumer behavior might be used to more successfully manipulate and influence consumers’ use of products, goods, and services. At the same time, an enhanced appreciation for the complexities of consumer behavior might be used to more successfully serve as an advocate for consumers in their interactions in the marketplace. Regardless of the direction in which the interested reader is heading, a firm understanding of the theory and research that illuminates consumer behavior is an excellent place to start.

Many people must be thanked for their contributions throughout the various stages of development of this text. At the top of the list, the many students who have worked through earlier versions of this text have provided innumerable

suggestions, comments, and encouragements. Kelly Shaver and John Nezlak have provided detailed, thoughtful, and extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of this text. The staff at Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, especially Jack Burton and Carol Lachman, have extended the patience and support that helped to transform this book from an idea into a reality. Lou Mullen deserves special thanks for her tolerance, her encouragement, her insightful comments, and her good cups of tea during the many late nights and interrupted vacations. Finally, thanks go to our parents, to whom this book is dedicated, for teaching us the first things we knew about consumers.

*Brian Mullen
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1 Introduction

Recall the last time you purchased a beverage in a grocery store. You located the beverage aisle, examined the various available brands, selected the chosen beverage brand, and paid for it on your way out: This seems to be an unremarkable and everyday sort of event. However, upon closer examination, there is a host of questions that are raised by this everyday behavior. How did you first become aware of the chosen beverage brand: through commercial advertisements on television, through your friends, or at the point of decision in the beverage aisle? How did you develop a positive evaluation of this brand: was it the price? Has this brand been recommended in the media by one of your favorite celebrities? Does this brand have something unique, making it stand out from the others? What made you want this brand in particular?

These are the type of questions asked within the field of consumer psychology, and this volume attempts to answer these questions in terms of current psychological theory and research. *Consumer psychology* can be defined as the scientific study of the behavior of consumers. A *consumer* is an individual who uses the products, goods, or services of some organization.

As Howell (1976) pointed out, each organization provides some product that is used by some consumers, even though we may not always recognize the products or the consumers as such. For example, it seems fairly obvious that the college students who drink a cola produced by a specific beverage company are the consumers of that beverage product. However, in a sense, we can think of public high school students as the consumers of a state's educational product; voters can be thought of as consumers of a political candidate's leadership and administration product; and, the members of a religious group might be viewed as consumers of a church's spiritual product. Thus, the study of the behavior of consumers involves examination of a wide range of everyday human behavior.

This textbook is structured around a general model of consumer behavior, presented in Fig. 1.1. This model helps the student of consumer behavior consider and deal with the variables and relationships that can affect consumer behavior. Generally, a model is a simple representation of something that is in fact more

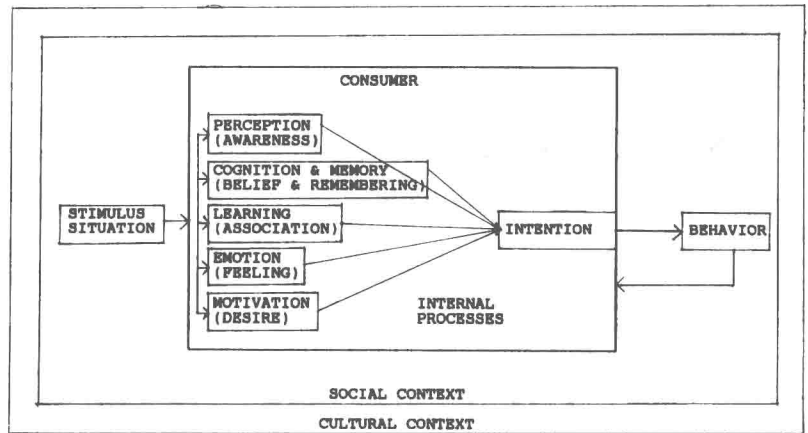


FIG. 1.1. A general model of consumer behavior.

complicated. The model in Fig. 1.1 leaves out some of the complexity of consumer behavior. Nonetheless, this model contains the most **fundamental** and the most **important elements** found in other common models of consumer behavior. In a sense, Fig. 1.1 is a simplified schematic illustration of the theory and research that we call consumer psychology. In this chapter we begin our study of consumer behavior by establishing some preliminary definitions of the variables and processes presented in Fig. 1.1. Before moving on to more detailed examinations of these variables and processes in subsequent chapters, we briefly examine some other representative models of consumer behavior, and we consider some basic issues regarding measurement.

A GENERAL MODEL OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Beginning at the left side of the model, notice that a box labelled “stimulus situation” is shown to influence the consumer. The stimulus situation is the **complex of conditions that collectively act as a stimulus to elicit responses from the consumer.** This suggests that consumer behavior is not typically thought of as being elicited by a single stimulus. Rather, **consumer behavior is considered to be the consequence of patterns or constellations of stimuli.** For example, when the consumer purchases a can of “Loca-cola” brand beverage, that consumer behavior was not merely the result of the cost of the product. Instead, we would have to consider the cost of the product, the characteristics of the advertisement of the product, the packaging of the product, the individual’s past experiences with the product, the placement of the product on the shelf, and so on.

At first glance, this might appear frustrating to the budding consumer psychologist; the stimulus situation that impacts upon the consumer seems to be unmanageably complex. However, it is important to recognize that the world in which consumers behave is, in reality, extremely complex, filled with continual commercials, pretty packaging, and confusing choices. The little box in Fig. 1.1 labelled “stimulus situation” is very full and busy.

Next, the model specifies a number of internal processes. These internal processes are a related series of changes that occur within the individual. Internal processes can be viewed as consequents that are caused by something else, or as antecedents that cause something else. When viewed as consequents, internal processes are thought of as the result of the stimulus situation, the individual's own behavior, the social context, the cultural context, other internal processes, and the interactions between these sets of variables. Research that views a given internal process as a consequent treats it as a dependent variable that is influenced by some independent variable(s). When viewed as antecedents, internal processes can be considered the cause of intentions, behavior, or some other internal processes. Research that views a given internal process as an antecedent treats it as an independent variable that influences some dependent variable(s). One special case of the use of internal processes as independent variables is the concept of psychographics. This refers to the use of individual differences in the internal processes to predict consumer behavior. As discussed in chapter 8, individual consumers who are especially likely to engage in a particular internal process may be more receptive to certain types of messages.

Each of the internal processes are discussed in detail in the chapters that follow. The internal processes are considered from both the perspective of consequents that are caused by something else (i.e., dependent variables) and the perspective of antecedents that cause something else (i.e., independent variables).

Perception is typically defined as the psychological processing of information received by the senses. The result of the internal process of perception is awareness of the product, or awareness of attributes of the product. Cognition refers to the processes of knowing or thought. The result of cognition is a collection of beliefs about or evaluations of the product. Memory refers to the retention of information regarding past events or ideas. The result of this process is the acquisition, retention, and remembering of product information. Learning describes a relatively permanent change in responses as a result of practice or experience. The result of this internal process is the formation of associations between stimuli or between stimuli and responses. Emotion is a state of arousal involving conscious experience and visceral changes. The result of this internal process is feelings about the product. Motivation is a state of tension within the individual that arouses, directs, and maintains behavior toward a goal. The result of this internal process is desire or need for the product.

Note that these internal processes were defined as a related series of changes. Discussing each process separately requires the establishment of somewhat arbitrary distinctions between interdependent events. For example, after the college student first sees a commercial for Loca-cola, he or she might express an interest in the product, and a desire to buy it. Perception seems to have occurred, because the consumer is aware of the product; cognition has taken place, insofar as the consumer has evaluated Loca-cola as being worthy of consideration; motivation may have been engaged, if the student really wants to try the product; and so on. This is to emphasize that, although we can conceptualize these internal processes as separate entities, we must address their interrelationships in order to obtain a full appreciation for their effects on subsequent events (specifically, their effects on other internal processes, intentions, and behavior). Another important thing

to recognize about this model is the lack of any predetermined sequencing of the internal processes. That is, the model does not assume that some internal process(es) must occur before other internal processes can occur. Thus, any internal process might come before, and influence, any other internal process.

Intention refers to a plan to perform some specific behavior. Behavior is typically defined as an act or a response. Within the context of consumer behavior, intention refers to the plan to purchase or use the product, and behavior refers to the actual purchase or use of the product. Bear in mind that this applies whether the product is a brand of toothpaste, a course in school, or a political candidate. Both intention and behavior are characterized in Fig. 1.1 as resulting from the direct and interactive effects of the internal processes. Note that behavior may influence the internal processes of the consumer. This type of *feedback* can have very important implications, and is considered in detail later in the book.

Social context refers to the totality of social stimulation that influences the individual. This can include friends, family, or sales personnel. The **cultural context** refers to the totality of cultural stimulation that influences the individual and his or her social context. This can include the individual's culture (e.g., late 20th-century America), subculture (e.g., rural southeastern United States university students), social class (e.g., middle class), and so on. Note that the individual (with his or her internal processes, intentions, and behavior) exists within, and is influenced by, a social context. Further, the individual's social context exists within, and is influenced by, a cultural context.

OTHER MODELS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Kover (1967) reviewed the use of models in consumer and marketing research. He noted that: "All models have one thing in common: they describe some basic behaviors, needs or situations and make the assumption that 'this is really what man is like'. Then, the particular study builds on this model and usually ignores behavior not included in the model" (p. 129). The intrinsic value of the model presented in Fig. 1.1 is that studies built upon or interpreted within this model will be able to ignore very little, if any, behavior. This is because the model is structured to incorporate the range of variables that have been examined previously in research on consumer behavior.

However, the reader should realize that this model is not some new theoretical breakthrough, "cut out of whole cloth." In actuality, this model is an extension and integration of many previous models of consumer behavior. These models of consumer behavior can be categorized into three types: undifferentiated, unilineal, and cybernetic. These three categories roughly correspond to the three time periods identified by Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat (1978) as pre-1960, 1960 to 1967, and 1967 to present.

Undifferentiated Models

The undifferentiated models of consumer behavior (pre-1960) amounted to lists of variables suspected to influence consumer behavior. However, these lists of variables seldom had any integrative framework (or, any substantiating empirical

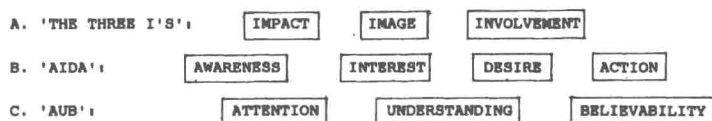


FIG. 1.2. Examples of undifferentiated models of consumer behavior (pre-1960) (Leavitt, 1961).

evidence) to justify their serious consideration by researchers. Leavitt (1961) described a number of these early models of consumer behavior, derived from the “folk wisdom” of advertising and marketing. Some of these undifferentiated models of consumer behavior, conveyed in Fig. 1.2, are The Three I’s (Impact, Image, Involvement), AIDA (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action), and AUB (Attention, Understanding, Believability).

For example, consider an application of the AUB model to the consumer considering Loca-cola beverage. The AUB model suggests that three things must occur if the consumer is to purchase Loca-cola: The consumer must become aware of Loca-cola (attention); the consumer must understand that Loca-cola is described as a cola beverage that quenches thirst for 50¢ a can (comprehension); and, the consumer must believe that Loca-cola is a 50¢, thirst-quenching cola beverage (believability). If these three things can occur, according to the undifferentiated AUB model, the consumer should purchase Loca-cola. These undifferentiated models of consumer behavior may be useful if they suggest variables that are important to understanding consumer behavior. However, simply listing these variables, without any consideration for how the processes occur or how they interact, does not take us very far toward explaining why people will buy or use a particular product.

Unilinear Models

The next general trend in models of consumer behavior led to the unilinear models (1960 to 1967). These models went a step beyond the simpler undifferentiated models by arranging the list of variables in some preestablished sequence. For example, Lavidge and Steiner (1961) proposed, and Palda (1966) developed, a “hierarchy of effects” model. Similarly, McGuire (1969) proposed an “information processing model of advertising effectiveness.” These models assume a single, one-way (“unilinear”) flow of influence among the variables included in the model. These two unilinear models are illustrated in Fig. 1.3.

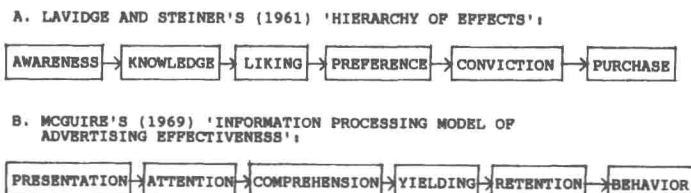


FIG. 1.3. Examples of unilinear models of consumer behavior (1960 to 1967).

For example, consider the application of Lavidge and Steiner's Hierarchy of Effects model to the consumer considering Loca-cola. The Hierarchy of Effects model suggests that the following events must occur, in this sequence, if the consumer is to purchase Loca-cola: the consumer must become aware of Loca-cola (Awareness); then, the consumer must know that Loca-cola is a 50¢, thirst-quenching cola beverage (Knowledge); next, the consumer must come to evaluate positively these attributes of 'cola', 'thirst-quenching', and '50¢ a can' (Liking); then, the consumer must come to prefer Loca-cola over all other competing brands (Preference); finally, if the consumer can commit to a specific plan to obtain Loca-cola (Conviction), then, the consumer will actually buy a can of Loca-cola (Purchase). These unilineal models begin to characterize some of the interdependence of the processes involved in consumer behavior. However, as it turns out, human behavior is seldom as simple and as rigid as these unilineal models seem to suggest.

Cybernetic Models

The latest phase in the development of models of consumer behavior is the cybernetic models (1967 to present). The term *cybernetic* refers to recent developments in information science and the understanding of how systems operate; cybernetics often implies the complicated type of information transmission and utilization that we associate with modern computers. The cybernetic models have gone beyond the simpler unilineal models in a number of ways. First, the cybernetic models are generally more complex, listing a larger number of variables than the earlier types of models. Second, although the cybernetic models generally incorporate a one-way flow of influence from one variable to the next, they typically allow for exceptions to this (previously unassailable) unilineal assumption. Finally, true to the term *cybernetic*, these models usually incorporate the process of feedback into the model. For example, if one variable (behavior) is influenced by another variable (perception), behavior might now "feed back" to influence perception. We consider this type of effect in chapter 9. Examples of cybernetic models are Howard's (Howard & Sheth, 1969) model of buyer behavior, and the Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat (1978) model. These cybernetic models are illustrated in Fig. 1.4.

For example, consider the application of Howard's Model of Buyer Behavior to the consumer considering Loca-cola beverage. As a function of whatever newspaper and magazines to which the consumer is exposed (Information Available), the consumer's tendencies to read such newspapers and magazines (Media Habits), and any thirst-(Arousal-) initiated searching for beverage information (Overt Search), the consumer may become exposed to information about Loca-cola (Information Exposed). Especially if thirst (Arousal) had stimulated an increased Attention, the consumer may be better able to retain and retrieve information about Loca-cola (Information Recalled). This recalled information about Loca-cola will contribute to the consumer's knowledge and understanding of Loca-cola as a thirst-quenching cola beverage that sells for 50¢ a can (Brand Comprehension). If this understanding of Loca-cola indicates that it is a close

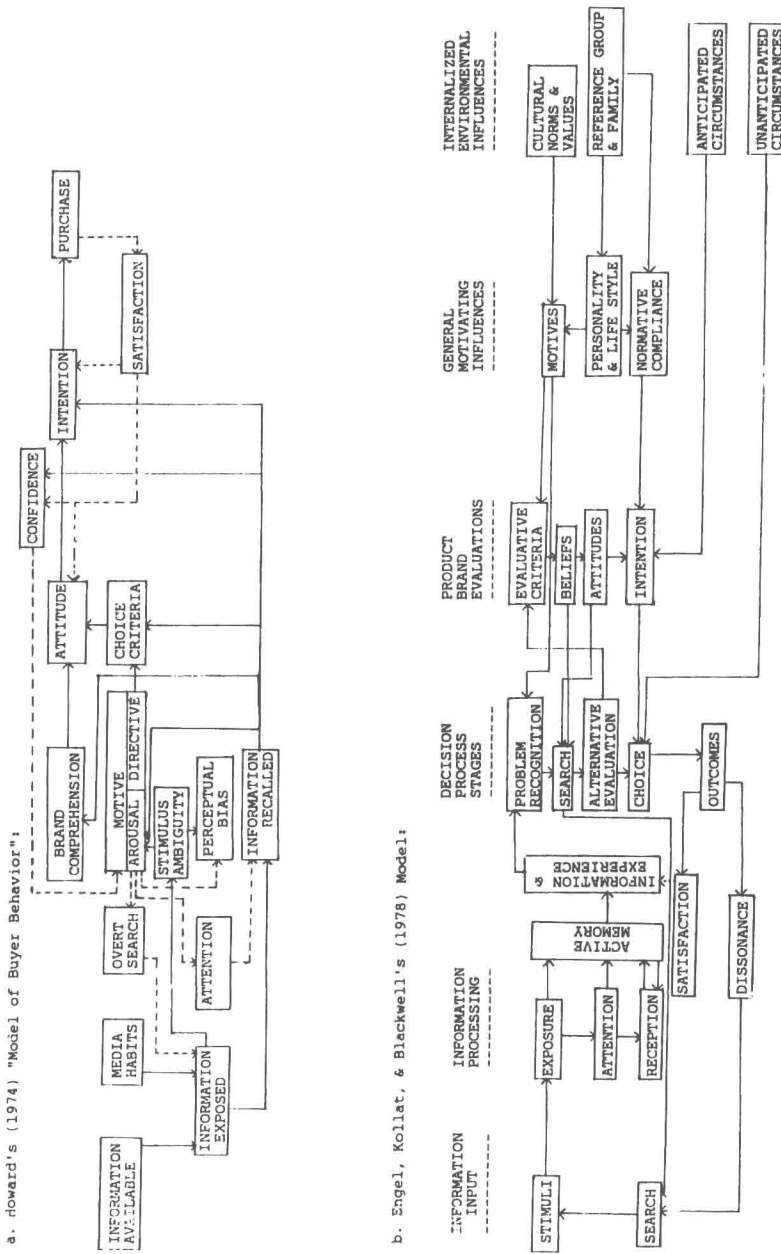


FIG. 1.4. Examples of cybernetic models of consumer behavior (1967 to present).

approximation of what a good beverage should be (Choice Criteria), this will lead to a positive evaluation of Loca-cola (Attitude), that may in turn lead to a plan to buy Loca-cola (Intention), that may in turn lead to the behavior of actually buying a can of Loca-cola (Purchase). Note that the retained and retrieved information about Loca-cola may influence this progression from brand comprehension to purchase in complex ways. Moreover, the purchase and use of Loca-cola will then feedback and influence how the consumer feels about Loca-cola (Satisfaction), future plans to buy Loca-cola (Intention), and certainty about Loca-cola and its attributes (Confidence), which may then in turn feedback and influence the motive that may have started the overt search for beverage relevant information in the first place. Even this partial and brief application of the cybernetic Model of Buyer Behavior illustrates the complexity and sophistication of this type of approach.

You have probably noticed the similarity between these cybernetic models (illustrated in Fig. 1.4) and the General Model proposed earlier (illustrated in Fig. 1.1). Note that the fundamental processes presented in the General Model of Fig. 1.1 are found in the various forms of the undifferentiated, unilineal, and cybernetic models presented in Fig. 1.2 through 1.4. This overlap is demonstrated in Table 1.1, in which the variables presented in each of the undifferentiated, unilineal, and cybernetic models are placed in the context of the General Model.

For example, consider the AUB model presented in Fig. 1.2. The three elements of the AUB model directly correspond to particular elements of the General Model of Fig. 1.1. Attention is included in the General Model as Perception; Understanding and Believability are included in the General Model as Cognition and Memory. Similarly, consider the Hierarchy of Effects model presented in Fig. 1.3. The seven elements of the Hierarchy of Effects directly correspond to particular elements of the General Model of Fig. 1.1. Awareness is included in the General Model as Perception; Knowledge, Liking, and Preference are included in the General Model as Cognition and Memory; Liking also involves elements that are included in the General Model as Emotion; Conviction corresponds to Intention; and, of course, Purchase is included in the General Model as Behavior. The reader can see from Table 1.1 that even the complicated and sophisticated cybernetic models presented in Fig. 1.4 are incorporated into the General Model.

The point is that the General Model of Fig. 1.1 is a relatively simple extension and integration of many previous models of consumer behavior. This book tends to rely on this General Model to provide an integrative framework in our consideration of the psychology of consumer behavior. Bear in mind that our task throughout the rest of this book is to understand the various links and connections suggested by the General Model presented in Fig. 1.1.

OPERATIONALIZATION, RESEARCH, AND LOCA-COLA

Before moving away from general, introductory issues, it is important to devote some attention to measurement issues. In the conduct of any science, theoretically important concepts and variables must be defined with extreme precision. One