



Towards a hierarchical theory of shopping motivation

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ABSTRACT

Shopping motivation is one of the key concepts in research on consumer shopping behavior and continues to be vividly discussed. Providing a revised theoretical perspective on this issue, the authors propose three hierarchical levels including purpose-specific, activity-specific, and demand-specific shopping motivation. A hierarchical model of shopping motivation is developed based on the theoretical properties introduced by corresponding research in the areas of social and organizational psychology and tested by means of a cross-contextual survey design. Evidence for the mediating nature of the established framework is provided and the findings reveal the dynamics of how purpose-specific shopping motivation predicts activity-specific motivation, which, in turn, determines demand-specific motivation. The moderating impact of the shopping context is tested, demonstrating in which way the relationship between activity and demand-specific motivation is more idiosyncratic in nature than the interrelation of purpose and activity-specific motivation. The utility of the study for future research and its managerial implications are discussed.

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Since Tauber addressed the question *Why do People Shop?* in 1972, shopping motivation has emerged as one of the key concepts in research on consumer shopping behavior. In addition to its importance in theory building, shopping motivation exhibits a high managerial relevance and is often used for the purpose of market segmentation and the development of retail marketing strategies (Westbrook and Black, 1985). Due to this high theoretical and practical relevance, shopping motivation has remained a current topic, vividly discussed in leading academic journals for more than 30 years. Given the central meaning of shopping motivation in the academic discussion, it comes as a surprise that there seems to be little agreement among marketing scholars about what shopping motivation precisely refers to. That is, shopping motives are frequently used and defined much differently in the literature. Even though it is generally acknowledged that shopping motivation may relate to a task-oriented or recreational shopping experience for the individual, most reviews do not seem to go much beyond this distinction.

Yet when taking a closer look at the existing research findings, it becomes apparent that different shopping motives tend to relate to different degrees of abstraction. That is, from a meta-analytical perspective on the literature, shopping motives can be ordered in a somewhat hierarchical structure, ranging anywhere from rather abstract motives (e.g., recreation) that express the

basic underlying predisposition of an individual toward a shopping trip, to very concrete motives (e.g., convenience in parking) which relate to consumers' particular expectations of a retail facility. This hierarchical perspective seems logical in that "a single shopping behavior enables individuals to acquire a set of hierarchically arranged benefits which can include cognitive, emotional, experiential, sensory, affiliative, and material benefits" (Darden and Dorsch, 1990, p. 301). Contemporary social science research, in general, has long adopted the notion that individuals' motivational processes relate to various hierarchical levels of abstraction as a dominant conceptualization (Austin and Vancouver, 1996), whereby reducing motivation to only one level of specificity is regarded as largely insufficient to explain the complexity of motivational processes (Vallerand and Ratelle, 2002). However, this hierarchical dimension inherent in human motivational processes appears to have been widely neglected by past scholarly efforts to explain shopping motivation.

The objective of the present work is the development of a hierarchical theory of shopping motivation. Our perspective is that the concept of shopping motivation is actually comprised of various hierarchical levels of abstraction, which are causally related. We conceptualize shopping motivation as purpose-specific, activity-specific, and demand-specific motivation, and employ a cross-contextual survey design as well as multi-group structural equation modeling procedures to test our theory. Evidence regarding the mediating nature of the framework is outlined and moderating situational effects are identified.

Our study makes a novel contribution relevant for academics and practitioners alike. First, expanding the conceptual domain

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and thereby the fundamental understanding of one of the key concepts in research on shopping behavior brings this field of academic endeavor up to par with “virtually all areas of scientific investigations of human cognition, motivation, and behavior” (DeShon and Gillespie, 2005, p. 1107). The presented empirical evidence regarding the interrelationships among hierarchically arranged motives facilitates a more complete understanding of the complexities underlying consumers’ motivational processes with regard to shopping. Second, whereas past research has revealed some simple main effects of situational variables on activated shopping motivation, little is known regarding the moderating role of such factors. This study provides first insights regarding how the relationships among motives are moderated by the underlying shopping context. Third, despite the strong managerial relevance of shopping motivation being generally acknowledged, the relationship between consumers’ shopping motivation and their more concrete preferences of particular store characteristics – representing actual actionable managerial variables – has not been thoroughly investigated. By testing the impact of activity-specific on demand-specific shopping motivation, the present research helps to reduce the shortcoming of current motivational theories to “account for specific actions and to point to particular strategies for influencing behavior” (Bagozzi et al., 2003, pp. 915–916).

This paper is organized as follows. First, an analytical framework is developed and employed to analyze the existing literature on shopping motivation. Next, a conceptual model is hypothesized. We then outline the data collection, estimation procedures, and empirical findings. The paper closes by summarizing the key findings of the study, discussing its managerial implications, and suggesting directions for future research efforts.

1. Literature analysis

In order to facilitate a systematic discussion of the existing research findings, an analytical framework was established following the suggestion by Doty and Glick (1994) to employ typologies as a form of theory building. Our literature analysis is based upon two fundamental dimensions, namely, the generic and the hierarchical dimensions of shopping motivation. The framework presented in Fig. 1 summarizes these analytical guiding principles and is characterized as follows.

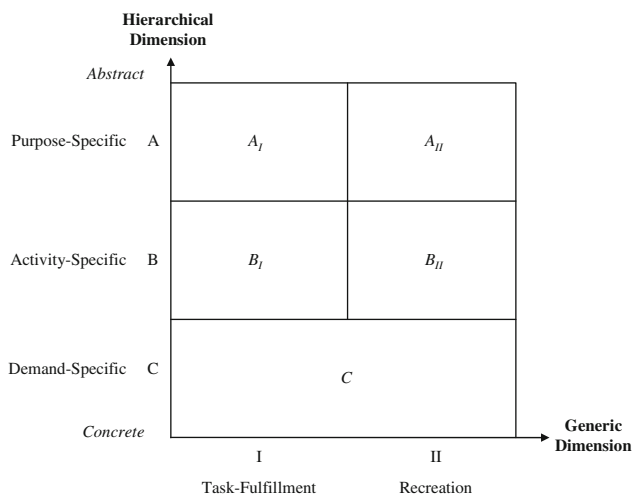


Fig. 1. Analytical framework of shopping motivation.

2. Generic dimension

There appears to be a widely acknowledged distinction as to whether consumers spend their time in shopping due to necessity or out of personal pleasure (Jacoby et al., 1976). In other words, shopping represents a current need for task-fulfillment or a desired recreational activity from the individual's perspective. This two-fold nature of shopping has been generally accepted by academics, yielding to varying nomenclature such as utilitarian vs. hedonic shopping value (Babin et al., 1994) or nonpurchase vs. instrumental shopping motivation (Natarajan and Goff, 1992). This common generic distinction is consistent with psychological research differentiating between extrinsic (i.e., engaging in an activity as required by external personal circumstances) and intrinsic (i.e., engaging in an activity for personal enjoyment) motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Due to the fundamental nature of this behavioral tendency, the generic dimension is employed here as the first analytical guiding principle. In our analytical framework, we distinguish between motives relating to task-fulfillment and recreation, representing these two basic underlying motivational predispositions.

Specifically, consumers pursue task-fulfillment when the shopping trip is regarded as a means to an end, providing functional value (Sheth et al., 1991). Such task-driven motivation typically results from an activated consumption need such as the need for a particular item of merchandise or products of a certain category such as groceries or clothing. In this view, consumers regard shopping as a “work” activity (Babin et al., 1994). Recreational shopping motivation, on the other hand, occurs when consumers regard the act of shopping as a recreational activity which is worthwhile in itself and tends to be more subjectively based and depends largely upon what an individual associates with a shopping experience in terms of desired social, emotional, and epistemic benefits (Sheth, 1983).

3. Hierarchical dimension

The hierarchical dimension facilitates to classify different motivations ranging anywhere between very abstract and more concrete degrees of abstraction. In the context of employees’ work motivation, Cropanzano et al. (1992) identify three hierarchical levels of motivation, namely, abstract direction orientations (e.g., approach orientation), concrete goals (e.g., activities to be performed), and specific performance goals (i.e., concrete standards to guide subsequent behaviors). Adopting this classification and translating it into shopping-related terminology, the current research differentiates in terms of a purpose-specific, activity-specific, and demand-specific level of shopping motivation.

The *purpose-specific* level corresponds to the most abstract form of motivation in our framework, providing insights into consumers’ given predisposition toward a shopping trip. Specifically, we define purpose-specific shopping motivation as the overall underlying objective of a shopping trip. Research findings on this abstract level are anticipated to emphasize the distinction between task-fulfillment and recreation. The *activity-specific* level, on the other hand, is more concrete in nature in that more tangible shopping activities are identified. By activity-specific shopping motivation, we pertain to consumers’ activity goals or desired behaviors on a shopping trip. These motives outline how consumers’ anticipate to accomplishing the overall aim of a shopping trip. Finally, the *demand-specific* level forms the most concrete end of the continuum on the hierarchical dimension. This operational level of shopping motivation relates to consumers’ particular expectations placed upon retail facilities (e.g., store accessibility). Motivations on a demand-specific level are

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