



Research Review

Buddhist psychology: Selected insights, benefits, and research agenda for consumer psychology

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Abstract

Consumer psychology has been overly reliant on a small set of paradigms. As a result, the field appears less prepared than it could aspire to be for contributing new knowledge on, and relief from, our hyper-consumption era. Accordingly, I explore Buddhist psychology by drawing from its foundational framework known as the Three Marks of Existence (suffering, impermanence, and no-self) to introduce an Eastern theory of mind and provide alternative guidance on research for consumer well-being. The TME framework offers an opportunity to re-think the priorities, nature, and processes of the comparing and judging consumer mind (e.g., expectations, preferences, satisfaction); the attaching and depending consumer mind (e.g., ownership, materialism, excessive behaviors); and the deciding, choosing, and regulating consumer mind (marketplace morality, cognitive biases, values-based choice, and free will). From these considerations I generate research questions and summarizing propositions for future research. The closing discussion synthesizes the contributions and limitations, including extra opportunities for integrating Buddhist and consumer psychologies. © 2016 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Buddhist psychology; Well-being; Satisfaction; Ownership; Materialism; Choice

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Introduction

*Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And time for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

*For I have known them all already, known them all—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
(Excerpts from T. S. Eliot [1915], “The Love Song of J.
Alfred Prufrock”)*

Eliot’s century-old portrayal of self-absorption, cognitive labyrinths, and ritualized consumption is both haunting and prescient, as we now witness our own era being thoroughly

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structured and impelled by activities of acquiring, consuming, and disposing. Each day in the developed world consumers are tracked and propositioned by businesses non-stop, both online and off-line; confronted with thousands of choices, some significant and many trivial, much of which challenges and tires them; and compelled by socioeconomic and cultural obligations to keep on searching, buying, owning, and discarding (Mick, Broniarczyk, & Haidt, 2004; Schor & Holt, 2000; Schwartz, 2004; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). According to numerous analysts, this globally-cascading ideology of marketplace gameship, vigorous consumption, and boundless economic growth is harmful to physical, psychological, societal, and ecological health (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Daly, 1998; De Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2005; Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004). It is no surprise then that the era has been variously characterized as one of skepticism (Wilson, 1993), paradox (Schwartz, 2004), the illusion of choice (Schmookler, 1993), exhaustion (Brown, 1995), and trauma (Emmons, 1999).

Whither consumer psychology? According to Pham's (2013) critique, it has evolved into an almost exclusive reliance on three paradigms: cognitive psychology, social psychology, and behavioral decision theory. Together these have produced valuable insights on consumer memory, preferences, attitudes, and choice, among other topics. However, being so rooted in only three mainstream social science paradigms, consumer psychology may be less prepared to contribute important knowledge on, and relief from, the exigent issues of our era than the field might aspire to. There is a lingering and enlarging need—for theoretical, substantive, and normative objectives—to seriously consider alternative approaches.

The one I introduce and explore in this paper is Buddhist psychology (Cayton, 2012; De Silva, 1979; Goleman, 1981; Kalupahana, 1987; Olendzki, 2003). It derives from historical Buddhism, which is considered the most psychological among spiritual traditions (Smith, 1991). After originating in India during the fifth century BCE, Buddhism spread throughout Asia. It eventually reached the West just over a century ago (see works by T. W. & C. A. Rhys Davids), and it elicited in succeeding decades strong interest among psychoanalytical, Gestalt, and humanistic psychologists (Mikulak, 2007).¹ Over time the Buddhism-oriented literature has elaborated profound insights about reality and consciousness through its concepts, principles, and contemplative practices, yielding a unique focus on well-being that is now being progressively quarried, corroborated, and extended by social science, educational

research, neuroscience, and medicine (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cayton, 2012; Chambers, Barbara Lo, & Allen, 2008; Davidson et al., 2012; Hanson & Mendius, 2009; Holzel et al., 2011; Sahdra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). These developments reflect what several Buddhist writers have espoused as a contemporary Westernized version of Buddhism (Batchelor, 2015; Dalai Lama, 2011; Loy, 2015), providing the collaborative groundwork for a new mind science (Dalai Lama, Benson, Thurman, Gardner, & Goleman, 1999; Davidson & Begley, 2012; deCharms, 1998; Hanson & Mendius, 2009; Rosch, 1997), at an apropos time when consumer psychologists have been encouraged to dwell more on theories of the consumer mind (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008).

A few consumer researchers have previously drawn on Buddhism. Gould (1991a), a pioneer in this area, wrote an essay on the Tibetan Wheel of Life that explains, for example, how the control of desires invokes calm vital energy and positive consumer behaviors, such as maintaining comfort and achieving inner growth (see also Gould, 1991b). In quantitative empirical work, Kopalle, Lehmann, and Farley (2010) focused on the Buddhist concept of *karma*, which emphasizes intention and accountability for one's behaviors. Their study found that a stronger belief in *karma* leads to higher expectations surrounding a company's product performances, which can then impact the level to which consumers are satisfied or not with a particular product or service experience. Also, Pace (2013) recently showed that people committed to Buddhism exhibit a lower materialism value due, in part, to certain ethical qualities associated with Buddhism, such as compassion and sympathetic joy. Looking across these works, and a few others (e.g., Wattanasuwan & Elliott, 1999), it is apparent that Buddhism has afforded several new insights on consumer behavior. As a group, however, these works have been eclectic, intermittent, and unconnected, leading Buddhist psychology to be mostly overlooked by consumer psychologists and unapplied in a more systematic manner.

Observing from the other direction, Buddhist writers have occasionally focused on consumption. Among the earliest is Schumacher's (1973/1989) treatise on the economics of voluntary simplicity. Since then there have been books, for example, addressing capitalism and money (Loy, 2008), in addition to edited volumes on consumerism (Badiner, 2002) and on specific impulses and motivations such as desire and greed (Kaza, 2005). Many of these are thought-provoking. Unfortunately, they are also consistently untethered to prior theory or findings on consumer behavior. This too may explain why Buddhist psychology has had little bearing so far on consumer psychology.

In light of Buddhism's long history, its voluminous literature and special terminology, and its present status as terra incognita among consumer psychologists, this paper is unavoidably suggestive and illustrative, rather than definitive and comprehensive. Thorough orientations to Buddhism and its psychology can be found in Aronson (2004), Brazier (2003), De Silva (1979), Garfield (2015), Harris (1998), and Kalupahana (1987), among others. Spurred by Pham's (2013) concerns, I seek to expand consumer psychology's paradigms, particularly as to how Buddhist psychology can be utilized to address aspects of

¹ There is debate on whether Buddhism is a religion, philosophy, psychology, or combination thereof. For example, since the original Buddha made no pronouncements about the existence of God(s), the possibility of a non-theistic or even atheistic Buddhism (e.g., Batchelor, 1997, 2011) is quite unlike Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. Moreover, Buddhism did not become religion-like until well after the Buddha's death, with centuries of followers laying over numerous new beliefs and rituals as Buddhism grew and migrated (Snelling, 1991). Hence, this paper leaves aside whether, based on its origins, Buddhism is a religion (see instead Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Following Brazier (2003), Cayton (2012), De Silva (1979), Goleman (1981), Grabovac, Lau, & Willett (2011), Kalupahana (1987), Olendzki (2003), and others, I treat Buddhism as a psychology that is highly germane to consumer behavior and research in our present era.

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