

Influence of Personality Theories on Consumer Behavior: Insights and Applications

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Abstract:

This paper aimed to demonstrate the importance of personality theories in understanding consumer behavior. It examined the development and limitations of psychodynamic, trait, behavioral, humanistic, and socio-cognitive theories. The paper also explored the relevance of these theories to consumer buying behavior, referencing empirical studies that have both supported and failed to establish a link between personality and consumer behavior. The conclusion was that these theories are crucial for comprehending the complex behavior of consumers and have been effectively used in developing marketing strategies. Additionally, the paper suggested that the low correlation between personality and consumer behavior found by some researchers is mainly due to their failure to study the subject outside the psychological context from which the concept of personality originates, and also due to issues with defining constructs.

Keywords: personality, consumer behavior, psychodynamic, traits, behavioral, humanistic, socio-cognitive.

1. Introduction

Consumer behavior, including the search, purchase, use, and disposal of goods and services, is influenced by various environmental, cultural, personal, and psychological factors. One psychological factor impacting consumer buying behavior is personality (Nakanishi, 1972; Agbonifoh, Ogwo, Nnolim, & Nkamnebe, 2007; DeJong, 2008; Gangajali, 2009; Lee, 2009; Tsao & Chang, 2010; Solomon, 2011). Personality can be defined as “consistent ways of responding to the environment in which a person lives” (Smith, 2001:66). To understand the origins, nature, and development of these consistent behavior patterns and their usefulness in human relationships, psychologists have developed various theories. The significant ones include psychodynamic, trait, behavioral, humanistic, and socio-cognitive theories (Myers, 1995; Burger, 2000; Franzoi, 2002; McLeod, 2014). These theories reflect the complexity of personality. Psychodynamic theory attributes personality differences to the interaction of instinctual drives and unconscious forces within individuals. Trait theory suggests personality is determined by a continuum of various characteristics (Burger, 2000: 5). Behavioral theory views personality as the result of interactions between personal and environmental factors (McLeod, 2007a). Humanistic theory emphasizes the positive aspects of human existence, focusing on self-determination and the need for self-actualization as primary causes of personality differences (Myers, 1995). The socio-cognitive approach theorizes that personality differences arise from different ways individuals process information.

Originally a focus in psychology for treating behavioral disorders, personality has become relevant in marketing (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010; Solomon, 2011). The inadequacy of variables like demography, culture, and social class to explain certain aspects of consumer buying behavior (Evans & Berman; 1995;

Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010; Krishnan, 2011; Solomon, 2011) led marketing scholars to adopt insights from personality psychology. Personality addresses not just 'who buys' and 'what they buy,' but also 'how they buy' and 'why they buy.' This information has been applied to developing marketing strategies and fulfilling the needs and wants of consumers in target markets (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2007; Schiffman & Kanuk; Solomon, 2011).

Most studies on consumer behavior focusing on personality often have limited literature, emphasizing quantitative data analysis for empirical results. This neglect of theoretical dimensions has left gaps in areas such as the development and criticism of personality theories, analysis of conflicting links between personality and consumer behavior, and explanations for these conflicts. This study aims to address these issues by examining the development and criticisms of major personality theories, reviewing research linking personality with consumer behavior, and explaining why some studies failed to establish positive relationships between the two constructs.

2. Definition of Personality

Personality has been defined in various ways, with Gangajail (2009: 97) acknowledging the difficulty in explaining it in one sentence, describing it as "vast and dynamic." This challenge dates back to the 1930s when Gordon Allport, a pioneering personality researcher, dedicated a whole chapter to defining personality (Azouley and Kapferer, 2004: 5). Even nine decades later, there is no consensus among researchers on a single definition. Blythe (2008: 73) defines personality as "the collection of individual characteristics that make a person unique and which control an individual's responses and relationship with the external environment." Kotler and Keller (2009: 197) describe it as "a set of distinguishing human psychological traits that lead to relatively consistent and enduring responses to environmental stimuli." Similarly, Smith (2001: 66) defines personality as "consistent ways of responding to the environment in which a person lives," while Solomon (2011: 240) sees it as "a person's unique psychological makeup and how it consistently influences the way a person responds to her environment." Schiffman and Kanuk (2010: 136) define it as "the inner psychological characteristics that both determine and reflect how a person responds to his or her environment." Consistency is a recurring theme in these definitions, as seen in the works of Smith (2001), Kotler and Keller (2009), and Berkowitz, Kerin, Hartley, and Rudelus (1994: 147), who describe it as "a person's consistent responses to recurring situations." Assael (2002: 124) defines it as "those characteristics that reflect consistent, enduring patterns of behavior." Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2007: 271) combine the environmental and consistency aspects in their definition, describing personality as "an individual's unique psychological makeup, which consistently influences how the person responds to his or her environment."

The controversy over defining personality was highlighted at the 2007 symposium of the 'Association for Research in Personality' (Mayer, 2007), where attendees argued that there is no fundamental conflict among definitions. The issue, according to Mayer (2007: 1), is the "failure of personality psychologists to use and assert those definitions." He compared definitions from four textbooks, noting that despite different wording, they share a common central idea: "(a) personality is a psychological system; (b) composed of a group of parts; (c) that interact; (d) and develop; and (e) that impact a person's behavioral expression." The contradictory views at the symposium were attributed to differences in fields and orientations, such as social psychology and personality psychology.

Despite varying definitions, two themes—consistency and environment—are prevalent. Thus, the concept of personality is both practically and theoretically real. The researcher operationally defines personality

as traits that make an individual unique and control their interaction with the external environment.

3. Theories on Personality

Personality psychologists have proposed various theoretical frameworks to explain the sources and development of consistent behavior patterns and intrapersonal processes. These theories, developed by numerous psychologists, aim to understand what makes us unique and why we behave the way we do (Burger, 2000: 5). According to Lee (2009: 3), these theories were designed to explain the structure, process, and development of human behavior. The major personality theories can be categorized into six groups: psychodynamic theory, trait theory, behavioral theory, biological theory, humanistic theory, and socio-cognitive theory.

3.1 The Psychodynamic Theory

The psychodynamic theory, a foundational psychological concept, posits that human personality develops primarily through the interaction of instinctual drives and unconscious forces within the individual. It assumes that human behavior is driven by unconscious motives, that different parts of the unconscious mind are in constant conflict, and that behaviors can be traced back to childhood experiences (McLeod, 2014).

The psychodynamic theory encompasses the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud (psychoanalytic theory) and the contributions of his followers (Neo-Freudian theories).

3.1.1 Psychoanalytic Theory

Freud's theory suggests that instinctual drives and early childhood influences are crucial factors in personality development (McLeod, 2014). His theory is based on a tripartite structure of the id, ego, and superego (Kassarjian, 1971; Franzoi, 2002; Agbonifoh et al., 2007; Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2007; Blythe, 2008; Bruner, 2009; Solomon, 2011; McLeod, 2014). The id, present from birth and operating on the pleasure principle, is the source of all psychic energy, demanding immediate gratification of instinctual and biological desires, such as sex and aggression, regardless of consequences (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). The superego represents the moral and ethical dimension, striving for perfection and acting as an ethical constraint on behavior (Williams, 1981: 135). The ego, balancing the id and superego, considers the cost and benefits of actions in terms of reality before deciding to act or not on impulses.

3.1.2 Neo-Freudian Theory

The Neo-Freudian theory consists of ideas from thinkers who agreed with the basics of Freud's psychoanalytic theory but modified and adapted it to incorporate their own beliefs and theories (Cherry, 2013b). Neo-Freudians accepted Freud's tripartite structure of personality, the importance of the unconscious, the shaping of personality in childhood, and the dynamics of anxiety and defense mechanisms (Myers, 1995: 467). However, they disagreed with Freud's emphasis on sexual drives as the primary motivator and the idea that personality is fully shaped during early childhood. Instead, they believed that social interactions are fundamental to personality formation and development and that the conscious mind plays a significant role in coping with the environment. Notable Neo-Freudians include Alfred Adler, Harry Sullivan, and Karen Horney.

Alfred Adler: Adler's school of individual psychology focused on individuals' efforts to overcome feelings of inferiority by striving for superiority (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). He theorized that encouraged individuals respond cooperatively, while discouraged individuals act in unhealthy ways by competing, withdrawing, or giving up.

Harry Sullivan: Sullivan researched Freud's mechanisms of anxiety and the unconscious to improve meaningful interpersonal relations. He believed personality could only be understood by observing behavior in interpersonal situations, arguing that personality "can never be isolated from the complex of interpersonal relations in which the person lives and has his being" (Sullivan, 1953: 10).

Karen Horney: Horney is known for her work on the "neurotic personality," defining neurosis as a maladaptive way of dealing with relationships. She identified three basic personality patterns: compliance (seeking love and avoiding antagonism), aggression (competing and seeking admiration), and detachment (desiring independence and privacy) (Solomon, 2011; Agbonifoh et al., 2007: 154).

Criticism: Freud's theory has been criticized for being scientifically untestable, focusing too much on early childhood and instinctive bases for personality, and primarily addressing psychological disorders. Neo-Freudian theories are also criticized for being scientifically untestable and accounting for only small aspects of personality.

Personality psychologists have developed various theories to explain the sources and development of consistent behavior patterns and intrapersonal processes. These theories are diverse and were developed by multiple psychologists in an effort to understand individual differences and behavior. The major theories of personality can be grouped into six categories: psychodynamic theory, trait theory, behavioral theory, biological theory, humanistic theory, and socio-cognitive theory.

3.2 Psychodynamic Theory

The psychodynamic theory, founded by Sigmund Freud, posits that human personality develops primarily through the interaction of instinctual drives and unconscious forces within the individual. It assumes that human behavior is unconsciously driven, different parts of the unconscious mind are in perpetual conflict, and behaviors are often traceable to early childhood experiences.

3.2.1 Psychoanalytic Theory Freud's psychoanalytic theory suggests that instinctual drives and early childhood influences shape personality. It is based on a tripartite structure of the id, ego, and superego. The id is the source of all psychic energy and operates on the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification of desires. The superego represents moral and ethical standards, influencing the individual to strive for perfection. The ego mediates between the primitive desires of the id and the moral constraints of the superego, considering reality before acting.

3.2.2 Neo-Freudian Theory Neo-Freudians agreed with Freud's basic concepts but introduced their own modifications. They emphasized social interactions and the role of the conscious mind in coping with the environment. Notable neo-Freudians include Alfred Adler, who focused on the drive for superiority and overcoming inferiority; Harry Sullivan, who emphasized interpersonal relations; and Karen Horney, who identified three basic personality patterns: compliance, aggression, and detachment.

Criticism of Psychodynamic Theory

1. Hypotheses are not scientifically testable.
2. Overemphasis on early childhood experiences and instinctual drives.
3. Focus on treatment of psychological disorders rather than broader personality development.

3.3 Trait Theory

Trait theory suggests that personality consists of a set of measurable traits that are relatively stable over time. Traits are pre-dispositional attributes that influence behavior across various situations. Pioneering

work in trait theory was done by psychologists like Gordon Allport, Henry Odbert, Raymond Cattell, and Hans Eysenck.

Development of Trait Theory

- **Allport and Odbert's Lexical Hypothesis:** Extracted 18,000 words describing personality traits from an English dictionary, eventually grouping them into 200 clusters.
- **Cattell's 16 Personality Factors:** Reduced Allport's list to 16 personality traits using factor analysis.
- **Eysenck's Model:** Focused on three traits: introversion/extroversion, neuroticism/emotional stability, and psychoticism.
- **The Big Five:** A widely accepted framework that includes agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and neuroticism.

Criticism of Trait Theory

1. Focuses on description rather than development of traits.
2. Presence of numerous personality scales without a common taxonomy.
3. Some researchers prefer different scales to the Big Five framework.

3.4 Behavioral Theories

Behavioral theory posits that personality is shaped by the interaction between individual factors and environmental influences. It emphasizes observable and measurable behaviors rather than internal mental states. Prominent behaviorists include John Watson and B.F. Skinner.

Key Concepts

- **Classical and Operant Conditioning:** Personality is shaped by conditioning and reinforcement through rewards and punishment.
- **Tabula Rasa:** The mind is considered a blank slate at birth, shaped entirely by experiences.

Criticism of Behavioral Theory

1. Too deterministic, overlooking the concept of free will.
2. Ignores the influence of the unconscious mind on personality.

3.5 Humanistic Theories

Humanistic theory views people as inherently good and driven by a desire for personal growth and fulfillment. It emphasizes creativity, free will, and human potential. Notable humanists include Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

Key Concepts

- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** Individuals are motivated to satisfy lower needs before pursuing higher needs, ultimately aiming for self-actualization.
- **Rogers' Self-Concept Theory:** Personality consists of the real self, perceived self, and ideal self, with an inherent drive for growth and self-actualization.

Criticism of Humanistic Theory

1. Emphasis on free will conflicts with the deterministic nature of scientific investigation.
2. Key concepts like "self-actualization" are vaguely defined.

3.6 Socio-Cognitive Theories

Socio-cognitive theory combines cognitive and social learning perspectives. It was significantly influenced by Albert Bandura and Julian Rotter.

Key Concepts

- **Bandura's Social Learning Theory:** Personality is shaped by observational learning and cognitive processing of information.

- **Rotter's Locus of Control:** Describes the degree to which individuals believe outcomes depend on their actions (internal locus) versus uncontrollable environmental forces (external locus).

Criticism of Socio-Cognitive Theory

1. Emphasis on cognitive processes may overlook deeper unconscious influences.
2. Integration of social learning and cognitive perspectives can complicate the clear delineation of influences on personality.

4. Nature of Personality

In studying personality, researchers and scholars have identified several key features that characterize its nature. These features include:

1. **Personality is Integrated:** Personality is an integrated whole, where all the factors that constitute personality interact with one another to produce a cohesive and unified identity (Blythe, 2008). This integration means that various aspects of personality, such as emotions, behaviors, and thoughts, work together harmoniously.
2. **Personality is Unique and Reflects Individual Differences:** Each person's personality is unique, reflecting individual differences. This uniqueness arises from the distinct combination of inner characteristics that constitute an individual's personality. While people may share some personal characteristics, the possible combinations of traits are so vast that each person remains different from others (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010; Blythe, 2008).
3. **Personality is Self-Serving:** Personality is designed to meet an individual's needs as defined by their traits (Blythe, 2008). This self-serving nature means that personality traits and behaviors are oriented towards fulfilling personal goals and desires.
4. **Personality is Consistent:** Once established, an individual's basic personality tends to be consistent and enduring, especially during adulthood. This consistency is evident when individuals respond in similar ways across different situations over time (Franzoi, 2002; Blythe, 2008; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010; Gharibpoor & Amiri, 2012). The consistency of personality traits enables marketers to segment markets and offer standardized products or services to different market segments.
5. **Personality is Multiply Expressed:** Personality is expressed in multiple ways beyond just behavior. It is reflected in an individual's feelings, thoughts, and social interactions. These various expressions of personality provide a comprehensive view of an individual's character.
6. **Personality Can Change:** Personality can change due to cultural and evolutionary processes (Franzoi, 2002). Major life events, such as marriage, childbirth, the death of a parent, a change of profession or job, natural disasters, or relocation to a new environment with a different culture, can lead to changes in personality (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). These events and experiences can significantly influence an individual's personality over time.

5. Linkage between Personality and Consumer Behavior

Personality theories have been applied extensively in the study of consumer behavior, although with varying degrees of success and controversy. Key theories such as psychoanalytic theory, neo-Freudian theory, and trait theory have been particularly relevant in understanding and predicting consumer buying behavior (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2007; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010).

Application of Personality Theories in Consumer Behavior

1. **Psychoanalytic and Neo-Freudian Theories:** These theories emphasize unconscious motivations and

early childhood experiences shaping personality. In consumer behavior, these theories have been linked to understanding deeper motivations for product choices and brand preferences. For instance, concepts like hedonic buying motives (seeking pleasure and enjoyment) align with aspects of these theories (Tsao & Chang, 2010).

2. **Trait Theory:** Trait theory views personality as a set of stable characteristics that influence behavior across situations. Traits such as innovativeness, need for uniqueness, and openness to experience have been associated with consumer behaviors like product adoption, brand loyalty, and preference for novel products (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010).
3. **Big Five Personality Traits:** The Big Five framework (agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, neuroticism) has been extensively studied in consumer behavior contexts. For example, consumers high in openness to experience and extraversion may seek novel and exciting products, while those high in conscientiousness may prefer reliable and functional products (Costa & McCrae, 1985; McCrae & John, 1992).

Empirical Evidence and Applications

1. **Hedonic Buying Motives:** Studies have found positive relationships between traits like openness to experience, extraversion, and neuroticism with hedonic buying motives, influencing impulsive and emotional purchasing behaviors (Tsao & Chang, 2010).
2. **Product Development and Marketing:** Personality traits inform product development strategies and marketing communications. Understanding consumer traits helps in segmenting markets effectively and positioning products that resonate with specific personality profiles (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010).
3. **Consumer Ethnocentrism:** Personality traits also influence consumer attitudes towards foreign-made products. Ethnocentric consumers, for example, prefer products and brands that align with their cultural identity (Shimp & Sharma, 1987).

Controversies and Challenges

- **Inconsistent Findings:** Not all studies find significant relationships between personality and consumer behavior. Factors such as measurement methods, definition of personality constructs, and situational variables can influence these outcomes (Kassarjian, 1971; Crosby & Grossbart, 1984).
- **Methodological Issues:** Critics argue that traditional personality tests used in psychology may not directly translate to consumer behavior studies, where behaviors like brand choice and product preference are influenced by multiple factors beyond personality alone (Williams, 1981).

6. Conclusion

While personality theories offer valuable insights into consumer behavior, their application is nuanced and context-dependent. Understanding how personality traits interact with other variables such as situational factors and cultural influences is crucial for predicting consumer behavior accurately. The ongoing debate and varying empirical findings underscore the complexity of linking personality to consumer decisions, necessitating continued research and refinement of methodologies in this area.

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