

THE DIMENSIONS OF CONSUMPTION NEEDS: A CONCEPTUALIZATION

James G. Helgeson, Gonzaga University

Abstract

Needs are a central concept for understanding individuals in their role as a consumer. Need structures from many sources have been applied to the act of consumption. Based on a synthesis of these structures, a three-dimensional model of consumption needs is proposed. This model not only serves as a conceptual tool but also has the potential of serving as a means of measuring the need satisfying ability of different products.

The Three Dimensions of Consumption Needs

A need is a lack, a deficiency (real or perceived). The terms "needs" and "motives" are generally used interchangeably which identifies the additional aspect of needs of providing an energizing (causal) and a directing (toward resolution) dimension to behavior. A general definition of consumption is the expenditure, barter or other such means of direct exchange for acquiring products, for individual use and/or disposition. Consumption Needs can thus be defined as: those deficiencies/lacks that produce problem recognition (and energize and direct behavior), which can be alleviated, solved or satisfied through the use and/or disposition of products obtained via expenditure, barter or other direct exchange means.

General need structures proposed by scholars in other disciplines (e.g. Murray 1938; Maslow 1970) have been adopted by students of consumption needs with a few consumer research generated structures advanced (e.g. Fennel 1975; Hanna 1980). By examining these various need structures fundamental underlying dimensions of needs become evident. These dimensions, utilizing very broad inclusive terms for categories, are Physical-Functional Needs, Psycho-Social Needs, and Situational Needs.

The Physical-Functional (P-F) Dimension of needs captures all the tangible needs. These needs are of a basic, physiological, and material nature. Basic existence needs, the intended functional/-utilitarian aspects of products and the results of the use of products would be found here.

The Psycho-Social (P-S) Dimension of needs captures those needs that are intangible. This intangibility manifests itself in the needs' general character (e.g. love, autonomy, etc.) and also in the needs' link to a product. That is, the link between the need satisfying capability of a product is relatively intangible when this need is for love. All the needs of psychological or sociological nature are found in this category. Here it is not the functional/utilitarian aspect of a product that is generally applied to satisfying needs but its meaning.

The Situational (S) Dimension of needs captures the transitoriness and situational variability present in the other two dimensions. An item may provide need satisfying ability in certain situations and at certain times. This dimension

considers the number of situations across which the other dimensions of needs may occur.

A Conceptual and Analytical Tool

As a conceptual and analytical tool the three dimensions of consumption needs can be viewed as a cubic model. A consumer can be thought of as evaluating competing items for their overall need satisfying ability across the three need dimensions. The overall need satisfying capacity of items can be compared by examining the overall volume of consumption needs satisfied by each item. Satisfied volume of needs is found by evaluating the interaction/applicability of each dimension of needs across each of the other two dimensions. Items at various levels of competition (e.g. brand level, product class level, etc.) can be compared in this manner both within or between levels.

Both the presence (i.e. activation) and salience (i.e. importance) of consumption needs can be conceptualized via this model. Presence would be determined by whether a need is satisfied by a particular item. Salience would be determined by the number of components on the other two dimensions across which a need is satisfied. For comparison of less involving, routine, items a reduced model consisting of only the P-F and P-S dimensions may be used. For more high involvement items that require more extensive evaluation the complete model, including the S dimension, would reflect the consumer's assessment process.

Various ways can be proposed for analyzing consumption needs using the three-dimensional model. For instance, to begin analysis the components of the P-F dimension would be ascertained by asking subjects to respond to questions regarding the physical needs satisfied and functional aspects of the item(s) under examination. In a like manner, the components of the P-S dimension would be obtained. For low involvement evaluations only these two dimensions need be examined. An approach for completing the analysis in this case would be to have subjects assess, on a rating scale, each P-F need as to its likelihood of concurrently satisfying each P-S need. This score would be a representation of the volume of needs satisfied by that item.

Items for which the consumer engages in extensive evaluation would require completion of the procedure noted above plus the additional step of analyzing the above two dimensions across the S dimension. Subjects could rate each component of the P-F and P-S dimension regarding the number of situations in which each is likely to be satisfied (e.g. very many to very few). Alternatively, the primary two dimensions could be evaluated as to the likelihood of being satisfied in each of a finite list of situations. Again the summed score here would represent the volume of needs satisfied by an item.

(References available on request.)