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Applied behavioral economics and consumer choice [☆]

Diane F. DiClemente ^{*}, Donald A. Hantula

Department of Psychology, Temple University, Weiss Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA

Abstract

This paper provides a review of the applied behavioral literature in consumer choice. Beginning with Watson and Lindsley's initial forays into consumer behavior from their respective bases as basic behavioral researchers, the role of behavior analytic theory and application in consumer behavior is appraised. The applied behavior analysis movement brought operant-based applications into the consumer field, largely focusing on pro-social and social marketing applications. Increased interest in behavioral theory sparked continuing research in classical conditioning of consumer attitudes and behaviors. Recent theoretical work in the Behavioral Perspective Model and in the Behavioral Ecology of Consumption both harken back to some of Watson's early influences as well as forge new ground for a comprehensive behavioral account of consumption.

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^{*} Corresponding author. Present address: Department of Psychology, Dickinson College, P.O. Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA.

E-mail address: diclemed@dickinson.edu (D.F. DiClemente).

1. Consumer psychology from a behavioral perspective: A review of the literature

The consumer is to the manufacturer, the department stores and the advertising agencies, what the green frog is to the physiologist.

Watson (1922)

In the study of consumer behavior, theoretical orientations have developed as disparate streams. Behavior analytic principles, which enjoy much empirical rigor, have also been applied to consumer behavior; however, this work has also lacked theoretical coherence, and has focused largely on attempts to produce reflexive conditioning in consumers exposed to advertising stimuli or to modify discrete consumer choices (Hantula, DiClemente, & Rajala, 2001). In recent years the application of behavior analytic principals to consumer behavior has been more systematic, as has the theory undergirding these applications, to the point that this work is now more akin to applied behavioral economics.

Consumer Psychology from a behavioral perspective is characterized by direct measurement of consumer behavior, longitudinal studies often using a small number of participants, and a basis in the basic theory of behavior analysis. The focus in this research area is primarily on what consumers do in space through time regarding the search for, acquisition and use of, and disposition of goods and services; and secondarily, if at all, on indirect measures of consumer behavior such as attitude, intention or liking. Although not prominent in the past within behavior analysis and within consumer psychology, the practical and theoretical relevance of a behavioral perspective on consumption is growing in influence in both fields. This review summarizes the major themes in past research and outlines particularly promising areas for future investigation.

2. Consumer psychology as a behaviorist viewed it

In 1920 famed psychologist John B. Watson joined the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. The creation of a national advertising industry in the 1920s grew as a response to the outgrowth of a system of industrial production that was becoming increasingly geared toward distributing goods on a national scale. Because of the tremendous growth of products and services, advertisers looked to psychology to advance the marketing process. Watson's analogy of the customer and the green frog with the marketplace as the laboratory and the consumer the experimental subject for the advertising industry illustrates how he conceptualized an objective experimental natural science based approach to marketing. Through a rigorous scientific psychological approach, Watson sought to discover the consumer's present needs and also to manipulate those needs to create desires for additional goods and services; consequently, he believed that behaviorism was ideally suited for such a task (Buckley, 1982).

According to Watson, it was possible to predict consumer behavior because a person was an organic machine, and it was no different controlling the behavior of peo-

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