

Approach and Avoidance Motivation: Investigating Hedonic Consumption in a Retail Setting

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Abstract

Retail shopping studies often conclude that desirable shopper behaviors, such as spending more money, indicate underlying approach motivation, while undesirable behaviors, such as leaving the store, indicate underlying avoidance motivation. However, hedonic consumption would seem to provide an opportunity not only for approaching fun and excitement but also for avoiding problems and stress in everyday life. This study investigates approach and avoidance motivations in a hedonic consumption context. Results show that both approach and avoidance motivation lead to heightened hedonic motivations for shopping and to more positive shopper evaluations. Additional investigation reveals several differences by gender and across four shopping contexts. Several theoretical and managerial implications are offered.

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Retail research has a long tradition of studying approach and avoidance motivation among shoppers. Studies commonly suggest that approach motivation is responsible for more “desirable” retail behaviors, like spending more money, staying in the store longer, or exhibiting stronger repatronage intentions (e.g., [Beatty and Ferrell 1998](#)), and that avoidance motivation is responsible for more “undesirable” retail behaviors, like leaving the store, spending less money, or postponing payment (e.g., [Donovan and Rossiter 1982](#); [Patrick and Park 2006](#)). However, a common element in much of this research is that approach and avoidance motivations are not directly studied, but rather inferred from shopper behaviors. The working assumption of much of this research is that approach motivation is generally associated with positive outcomes while avoidance motivation is generally associated with negative outcomes.

However, hedonic consumption may be an exception to this general perspective. Studies have shown that people seek hedonic experiences for their stimulative and experiential qualities ([Wakefield and Baker 1998](#)), or in other words, to satisfy approach motivation. Studies have also shown that people who are avoidance-motivated learn to seek out experiences which

help to reduce stress and anxiety ([Carver and White 1994](#)). Shopping is one such context which has been recognized to have substantial “escapist” and fantasy-like qualities, as people sometimes shop because it helps them to forget their problems in other aspects of life ([Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994](#)). In such settings, retailers are uniquely positioned to deliver an experience where shoppers are able to avoid stress-provoking situations and have the opportunity to escape from daily life, if only briefly. Hedonic experiences therefore may be sought not only for the *presence* of certain qualities, like stimulation and excitement, but also for the relative *absence* of other qualities, such as aversive stimuli.

This raises the interesting possibility that both approach and avoidance motivation can lead to “desirable” behaviors. In other words, shoppers potentially can engage in hedonic consumption to satisfy approach needs, such as seeking excitement, as well as to satisfy avoidance needs, such as escaping to a fantasy world of shopping. For retailers, this too raises interesting issues. Should retailers focus on maximizing the fun and excitement of shopping, or should they focus on minimizing the stress and anxiety of everyday life? Our findings suggest that the answer may in fact be both.

Although research is beginning to reveal new insight into the regulatory orientations of consumers ([Haws, Dholakia, and Bearden 2010](#)), few studies in marketing have explored how and why the systems which govern shoppers’ approach and

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avoidance tendencies – the behavioral activation and inhibition systems – influence retail evaluations and behaviors. This is the purpose of the research reported here. We propose a hierarchical model of motivation, and find that shoppers' behavioral activation (approach) and inhibition (avoidance) systems are positively related to hedonic shopping motivations and to perceptions of hedonic shopping value (HSV) toward a recent shopping trip. Our findings suggest that hedonic consumption would seem to satisfy both approach and avoidance motivation. We believe this to be a primary contribution of this study.

Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual model guiding this research. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First we propose a motivational hierarchy and discuss relevant research, and then advance several hypotheses. We then describe the methods employed in this study, discuss the findings, and provide a general discussion of the major implications of the study as well as limitations inherent in this research.

Background and hypotheses

Approach and avoidance motivation

Approaching pleasure and avoiding pain is governed by two underlying neurobiological systems (Gray 1987, 1990). The *behavioral activation system* (BAS) reflects the sensitivity to rewards and positive stimuli, and facilitates movement toward positive goals. The *behavioral inhibition system* (BIS) reflects the sensitivity to punishment cues and negative stimuli, and guides behavior to avoid painful outcomes (Carver and White 1994). Both systems represent distinct structures in the nervous system, vary between individuals in composition and strength, and produce a perceptual vigilance, emotional reactivity, and a behavioral predisposition toward positive/reward or negative/punishment stimuli respectively (Carver and White 1994; Elliot and Thrash 2002; Gray 1990). In recent personality research, the BIS and BAS have been directly studied in such areas as message framing, predictions of risk, and satisfaction in daily life and experiences (e.g., Mann, Sherman, and Updegraff 2004; Updegraff, Gable, and Taylor 2004). Numerous other studies have examined BIS and BAS in relation to emotion, physiological brain activity, abnormal psychology and childhood development.

The BIS and BAS are also closely related to the self-regulation constructs of promotion and prevention focus, both of which have received substantial attention in marketing studies (see Haws, Dholakia, and Bearden 2010 for an excellent comparison of measures). These regulatory systems govern how people pursue goals, and can be a chronic predisposition of individuals or can be situationally induced (Aaker and Lee 2001; Higgins et al. 2001; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, and Valencia 2005). Recent studies have examined promotion and prevention focus in the context of choice and temporal perspective (Mogilner, Aaker and Pennington 2008), assessments of value (Avnet and Higgins 2006), and emotional intelligence (Arnold and Reynolds 2009), among other areas.

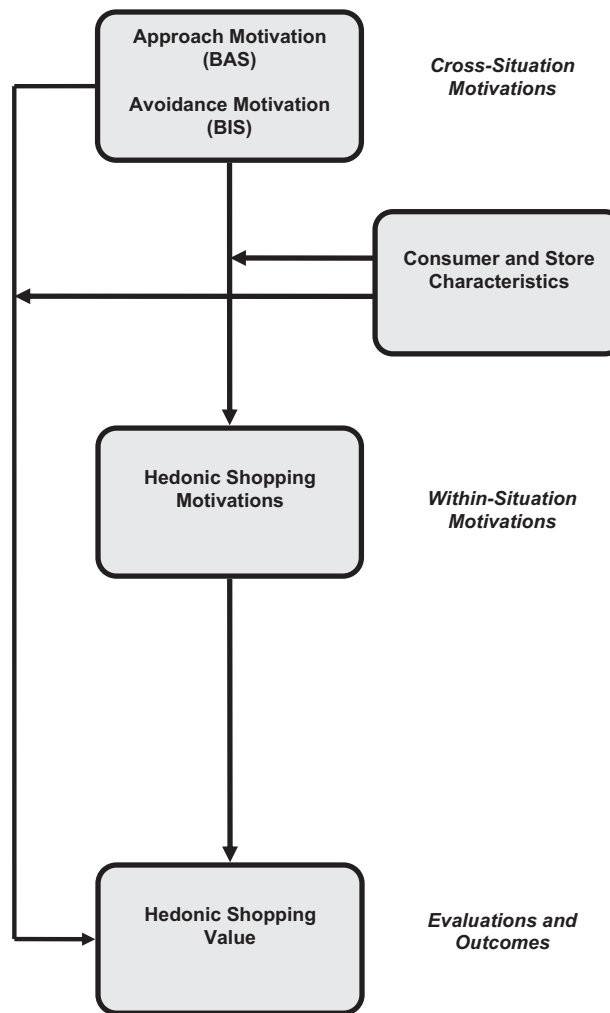


Fig. 1. A motivational hierarchy.

A motivational hierarchy

The dominant conceptualization of the interrelationships between goals and motivations is hierarchical (Austin and Vancouver 1996). Such hierarchies often make distinctions between motivations and goals which are influential across situations and those which are confined to specific contexts (see e.g., the 3M Model; Mowen 2000).

Cross-situation motivations

In motivational hierarchies, higher-level motivations are cross-situational in nature, incorporate cultural and subcultural influences, and affect lower-order traits and outcomes both directly or through intervening levels (Mowen 2000). Approach (BAS) and avoidance (BIS) motivations are classified here as cross-situation traits because they are fundamental motivational dispositions, linked to genetic code and early socialization, are influenced by cultural norms and values, and are enduring dispositions to behave across all situational contexts (Carver and White 1994; Elliot and Thrash 2002; Updegraff, Gable, and Taylor 2004). The BAS is responsible for positive feelings, such as hope and elation. People with greater BAS sensitivity are

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