

Finding the emotion behind consumer behavior

By David F. Morill
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There are no white lab coats in the Mason School, but make no mistake about it, there's lots of science going on. Just ask Todd Mooradian.

"Business school professors are scientists," says Mooradian, an associate professor and expert in services marketing, cross-cultural marketing, and international marketing strategy. "We're generally not doing this for commercial purposes, although our findings certainly impact the bottom line."

Mooradian in particular examines the psychology behind consumer behavior and customer satisfaction. "Consumer behavior is an amalgamation of microeconomics, anthropology, sociology, and a lot of social psychology," he says. "Basically, I connect personality traits to differences in the way people respond to things like advertisements, products, and stores."



When Mooradian started out in graduate school, personality was a minor and somewhat out of favor sub-discipline of social psychology. On the other hand, one promising area of consumer psychology receiving increasing attention was emotion. "By the early 1980s, we realized the act of buying centered more on emotion than on rationality," Mooradian says. "I found a couple of articles that linked personality to emotion, which led me to look at personality's effects on emotional responses to products and ads."

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For the past five years, Mooradian has focused on connecting personality traits to consumer behaviors across cultures. In 2007, he collected data on consumers in the United States, Spain, and Japan, measuring extroversion (positive emotionality) and neuroticism (negative emotionality), emotional experiences with a relatively standardized retail setting (a global retail store), and customer satisfaction and purchases. "We looked at ways national character predicts differences in personality and how personality predicts differences in consumer behaviors," he says.

The result, in line with a larger study of 50 different countries conducted by other researchers, found that Americans are much likelier to be upbeat and positive (high on extroversion) and the Japanese more anxious (high on neuroticism), with the Spanish firmly in the middle. This means that, within the setup of the particular store under consideration, Americans tend to experience more positive emotions, to be more satisfied, and to make the largest amount of purchases.

Mooradian's findings not only add to the science of human behavior, but help inform the world's leading retailers and marketing managers of practical ways to predict behavior and gear marketing to national characteristics. For instance, a retailer can add "delighters" (such as free samples or a service like carrying groceries to a customer's car) or remove "dissatisfiers" (things that produce negative emotions like dirty floors or slow checkout lines), depending on the typical personality profile of the culture and market. The benefits for new international retail ventures will be appreciable -- and appreciated.

Having grown up in a college town, Mooradian has himself always appreciated the atmosphere of academic life. He was glad to earn an MBA after college, but quickly realized a professional degree would keep him from doing applied research.

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"I solved the problem by getting a doctorate in marketing -- a good match for my dual interests in business and academia," he says.



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