What are Values in Consumer Behaviour?

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The relevance of values to consumer behaviour is well documented in the literature. Whereas studies have shown consistent relationships between values and various consumer behaviours, the strengths of such relationships tend to be modest. Apart from the lack of theoretical explanation of how values are causally related to other constructs in influencing consumer behaviour, it is the contention of this paper that the fundamental reason lies in the lack of a clear understanding of the construct itself. The purpose of this paper is to review the definition and nature of values and distinguishes values from other constructs so that future research can provide better theoretical explanation and prediction on how values influence consumer behaviour.

1. Introduction

The importance of values is best summarised in the following statement of theory:

Values are determinants of virtually all kinds of behavior that could be called social behavior – of social action, attitudes and ideology, evaluations, moral judgments and justifications of self and others, comparisons of self with others, presentations of self to others, and attempts to influence others. Boiling all these down to a more succinct theoretical statement, it can perhaps be stated that values are guides and determinants of social attitudes and ideologies on the one hand and of social behavior on the other. (Rokeach 1973: 24)

The study of values originated in social sciences in the 1930’s (e.g., Allport and Vernon 1931) but did not receive much attention in marketing until the late 1970’s (e.g., Henry 1976; Howard 1977; Vinson, Scott and Lamont 1977). Comprehensive reviews arguing for the relevance of values to consumer behaviour can be found in Pitts and Woodside (1984), and various special journal issues (e.g., Psychology & Marketing 1985, Journal of Business Research 1990, 1991). Despite general acceptance that values influence consumer behaviour, research findings indicate that the strength of the relationship tends to be modest. One of the reasons for this weak relationship can be attributed to the measurement problems in values research (e.g., Reynolds and Jolly 1980; McCarty and Shrum 1997).

Apart from the lack of theoretical explanation of how values are causally related to other constructs in influencing consumer behaviour, it is the contention of this paper that the fundamental problem which hindered the development in values research is the lack of a clear understanding of the construct itself.

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2. Definition of Values

A comprehensive review of the literature on values research by Agle and Caldwell (Agle and Caldwell, 1999) conclude that the following description from an earlier era still applies: “Confusion persists in the study of values (Fallding, 1965, p.223).” One of the reasons for the confusion in the study of values is that values are often made synonymous with things valued (Fallding, 1965). A clear definition of value is therefore of paramount importance if we are to advance in values research.

Najder (1975) identifies three basic senses of value which appear in philosophical literature and in everyday speech: axiological, attributive, and quantitative senses (see Table 1).

### Table 1: The Three Senses of Values

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<th>In theoretical terms</th>
<th>In everyday speech</th>
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<td><strong>Axiological Value</strong></td>
<td>M is an axiological value if and only if M is a judgement, ascribing the quality of valuableness to objects, properties, or states of affairs, and constituting within the given value-system a final justification of other judgement of the system. (The axiological value or judgement is expressed in a sentence or statement, which Najder names the “value-principle.”)</td>
<td>Value is a certain idea, principle, or criterion, which allows us to evaluate particular occurrences, objects, and properties – and, consequently, to ascribe to them value, positive or negative, in attributive sense.</td>
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<td><strong>Attributive Value</strong></td>
<td>Any object P or property A, to which a value-principle, accepted within the given system of evaluation W, ascribes the quality of valuableness, is an attributive value or has value in the attributive sense, within this value-system.</td>
<td>Value is a valuable (a) thing or (b) property (quality); something to which valuableness is ascribed.</td>
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<td><strong>Quantitative Value</strong></td>
<td>A quantity of substance, or a measurable degree of a property, to which substance or property the quality of valuableness is attributed within the given system of evaluation W, on the basis of a value-principle.</td>
<td>Value is what a thing is worth; something translatable into or expressible by some units of measurement or comparison, frequently definable numerically.</td>
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This tri-meaning classification is consistent with the dictionary definition of value. According to The Australian Reference Dictionary (1991, p.848), value as a noun is defined as (the correspondence between each dictionary meaning of value and Najder's classification is put in bracket):

1. the amount of money, goods, or services etc. considered to be equivalent to a thing or for which it can be exchanged. (Quantitative value)
2. desirability, usefulness, importance. (Attributive value)
3. the ability of a thing to serve a purpose or cause an effect. (Attributive value)
4. (in pl.) one's principles or standards; one's judgement of what is valuable or important in life. (Axiological value)
5. the amount or quantity denoted by a figure etc.; the duration of a musical sound indicated by a note; the relative importance of each playing-card, chess piece, etc., in a game; (in painting) the relative lightness and darkness of tones. (Quantitative value)

This triple meaning of value (quantitative, attributive, and axiological) is not a peculiarity of English; it exists also in other languages (Najder, 1975).

One of the major problems in previous values research is that many researchers make no clear distinctions among the three types of value meanings. For example, when Zeithaml (1988) discusses the relationship between price, perceived quality, and perceived value, she suggests, "... value may be similar to the 'emotional payoff' of Young and Feigen (1975), to 'abstract, multi-dimensional, difficult-to-measure attributes' of Geistfeld, Sproles, and Badenhop (1977), and to 'instrumental values' of Olson and Reynolds (1983)." (Zeithaml, 1988, p.14).

Value as "emotional payoff" is best described as quantitative value, similar to utility in economics or multiattribute expectancy-value in attitudinal models in consumer behaviour (e.g., Vodopivec, 1992, Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), and should not be mixed with "instrumental values" in the axiological sense. The quantitative sense of value in economic analysis is "the relative position of a good in a preference ordering, and the higher its position the greater is its value" (Kuhn, 1963, p.266).

The mixing up of the different senses of values by researchers in their studies do not only cause confusions to the reader but also render their research findings questionable and their practical applications doubtful.

For the purpose of this paper in understanding the relationship between values and consumer behaviour, we are referring to the axiological meaning of value. Value in the axiological sense belongs in the same semantic category with terms such as "rule", "principle", "law", "explication", and "justification". Axiological values usually concern states of affairs, such as happiness, honour, equality, but also types of behaviour such as impartiality, honesty, fidelity; formal relations, such as coherence, harmony, and so on. These states of affairs, types of behaviour, attitudes, and formal patterns are frequently call "idea", or "ideals". Value-principles can contain either names of these ideals, or their descriptions (indefinite descriptions). Value principles
may occur in both positive or negative forms: “honesty is good”, “avarice is bad”. (Najder, 1975)

Kluckhohn (1951) is the first to synthesise a host of studies concerning the concept of value and produces the following definition of value:

“A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions.” (Kluckhohn, 1951, p.395).

As commented by Bond (1996), Kluckhohn’s synthesis identifies a number of features common to many discussions of value before and since. This axiological definition of value by Kluckhohn is similar to the definition by Rokeach (1973) in his seminal work on values research, in which Rokeach provides the following definitions of value and value system:

“A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.” (Rokeach, 1973, p.5).

A comprehensive review of the literature on values by Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) suggest the following definition of values which include the main features on which most theorists agree:

“Values are (a) concepts or beliefs, (b) about desirable end states or behaviors, (c) that transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance.” (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987)

The above definition of values by Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) is adopted for this paper.

3. Characteristics of Values

Building on the definition of value by Schwartz and Bilsky (1987), Smith and Schwartz (1997, p.80) further elaborate the characteristics and nature of values as follows:

1. Values are beliefs. But they are not objective, cold ideas. Rather, when values are activated, they become infused with feeling.
2. Values refer to desirable goals (e.g., equality) and to the modes of conduct that promote these goals (e.g., fairness, helpfulness).
3. Values transcend specific actions and situations. Obedience, for example, is relevant at work or in school, in sports or in business, with family, friends or strangers.
4. Values serve as standards to guide the selection or evaluation of behavior, people, and events.
5. Values are ordered by importance relative to one another. The ordered set of values forms a system of value priorities. Cultures and individuals can be characterized by their systems of value priorities.

In the following, we will examine each of these five characteristics of values in detail.

3.1 Values as Beliefs

Although Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) and Rokeach (1973) had pointed out that similar to attitudes, values have three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioural, research in values tended to make no distinction between these three components.

In a recent study by Maio and Olson (1998), they argued that many values are cultural truisms: beliefs that are shared and rarely questioned (i.e., with little cognitive support). Some specific values are not truisms if they are controversial, debated or both. They suspect that values are supported primarily by affective information (feelings about values) and, secondarily, by behavioural information (recollections of value-affirming behaviour).

Research in the past tended to concentrate on the cognitive component of values, ignoring the affective and behavioural components of values. Future research should look into all the three components of values and how they operate in shaping attitudes and behaviours, particularly in different cultural contexts.

3.2 Values as Desirable Goals and Modes of Conduct

Rokeach (1973) maintained a distinction between instrumental values (modes of conduct) and terminal values (end states of existence). He argued that the content of the two types of values differs; terminal values refer to social and personal concerns, instrumental values to morality and competence. However, Schwartz (1994) question the prevailing assumption that the terminal/instrumental distinction is worth retaining in empirical work as all instrumental values may be conceptualised as terminal and people can treat any terminal value as instrumental to another.

As pointed out by Weishut (1989), many instrumental values can be transformed into terminal phrasing (into norm: e.g., independent to independence) and terminal values can be transformed into instrumental phrasing (into adjectives: e.g., politeness into polite). Weishut (1989) find that, for most values, both phrasing show similar correlations with background and attitudinal variables and there are no significant rating differences between both phrasings. In this paper, we do not make distinction between instrumental and terminal values.

3.3 Values Transcend Specific Actions and Situations

The notion that values transcend specific situations rests on the assumption that "the values relevant to an attitude issue are pulled out of the value system and applied to
the attitude issue in the same rank order as they existed originally in the value system. In other words, there is one value system (i.e., one rank ordering of values) for each person, and the individual's attitudes are determined from the ordering of the relevant values in it” (Seligman and Katz 1996).

However, it is closer to reality that people do construct (or reconstruct) their value priorities depending on the context they are asked to do so (Seligman and Katz 1996). This does not mean that we do not have a general value system. But, the validity and usefulness of such a general system has to remain at a general level. For example, comparing the general value changes over time in a particular culture or sub-culture; or comparing the general value similarities or differences between cultures or sub-cultures at a particular time point or over time if the values are universal.

There are inherent problems in the use of general values to predict specific behaviour because (1) not all values are relevant in a specific decision context, and (2) the ordering of the values may change in a specific context. Thus, if we want to predict and explain behaviour with a higher degree of accuracy, we need to firstly understand the causal relationship between values and consumer behaviour.

3.4 Values as Standards

After reviewing various definitions of value, Kilmann (1981) concludes, "It seems that 'values' might be most uniquely defined vis-a-vis a set of evaluative dimensions. For example, some evaluative dimensions are: good-bad, right-wrong, desirable-undesirable, appropriate-inappropriate, shoulds and oughts." Rokeach (1973) points out that the degree and extent of “oughtness” will be partly a function of society's demands with regards to the value. Some values are more likely to be shared and to be insisted on in a particular culture/society (“emic,” or cultural-specific). Other values, especially the moral instrumental values (e.g., honest) are more likely to have a universally agreed attribute of “oughtness” (“etic,” or cultural-free).

Olson and Zanna (1993) conceptualised values as higher-order evaluative standards, referring to desirable means and ends of action. As such, values are viewed as potential determinants of preferences and attitudes. Values can influence perceived valences both of alternative ways of behaving and of expected outcomes of the actions.

3.5 The Ordered Set of Values Forms a System of Value Priorities

Values as a system is implied in Rokeach's (1973) discussion that personal values are in competition with social values, and that an increase in one social value would lead to an increase in other social values and decreases in personal values. Schwartz (1992) is the first to suggest a comprehensive value system by partitioning 56 values into 10 motivational types which are further categorised into two fundamental dimensions: Self-Transcendence -- Self-Enhancement, Openness to Change -- Conservation. The motivational differences between value types are continuous rather than discrete. Value types close to each other are complementary or related whereas value types opposite are competing values.
The advantages of Schwartz’s classifications are (1) it is more reliable to look at value types instead of individual values (the same arguments in favour of the use of multi-items vs single item in attitude measurements), and (2) the recognition that whilst some value types are complementary to each other, some values types are in conflict with each other. Thus, how people resolve value conflicts will have a bearing on their behaviours. There may exist cross-cultural difference in value conflict resolution strategies as reflected in different business negotiation styles reported.

Many researchers, by focusing on separate values, have overlooked the fact that an individual organises the values he or she has learned into a value system along a continuum of relative importance (Rokeach, 1973). While values are generally suggested to be transcendental instead of situation-specific, our observation is that although people’s absolute value ratings may be transcendental, the relative importance of values for the individual may be situational. We believe that this relative conception of values as a system is more realistic in light of the fact that consumers are often confronted with conflicting values, whereupon they have to resolve the conflict by (re)ordering their values so as to make a product choice, or else forego the product altogether, which they rarely do.

4. Values versus Other Related Constructs

The relevance of studying the relationship between values and behaviour is best summarised by the following three underlying assumption put forward by Mayton, Ball-Rokeach, and Loges (1994) in their introduction to the Journal of Social Issues Special Issue on Human Values and Social Issues: "...one is that we all have values to talk about, and the second is that our values are not all exactly alike, so that they are worth talking about. The third is that the people of the nation know enough and care enough about their values to join this conversation."

To understand the causal relationship between values and consumer behaviour, it is important that we firstly distinguish values from other related constructs before we can propose theoretical explanation on how values are causally related to other constructs in influencing consumer behaviour.

4.1 Values and Motives

Motive or motivation is “an internal state that activates goal-oriented behavior” (Solomon, 2004). Although values are not motives per se, they are linked. Many particular motives may reinforce commitment to a given value (Williams, 1968). As Kluckhohn (1951, p.425) states, “A given value may have a strength that is relatively independent of any particular motive, though it remains in some sense a function of the total motivational system.”

The primary difference between values and motives is that motives and the related set of concepts like needs, desires, and wishes all refer to an individual being in a state of some deficiency or tension and focusing on the reduction of the deficiency or tension. Values, on the other hand, suggest what an individual ought to need, desire, want, etc., regardless of what the individual feels deficient about (Kilmann, 1981).
While the terms needs, desires, and wishes are often used interchangeably in the literature, William (1968, p.284) makes some refined distinctions on these terms and their relations to values:

“Values are not the same as needs or drives. Needs derive from deficiency or disruption. Desires are wishes or appetitions directed toward certain objects or state. Desires may become so intense as to become needs, and needs are typically intermingled with corresponding desires. In any case, however, it is possible for there to be a need or a desire (for example, for food) in which values are not the only, or even the most important, component. On the other hand, values themselves may be a source of needs and desires, as when one seeks to remove the pangs of not fulfilling ‘one’s duty’ or positively aspires to live up to high standards of craftsmanship.”

“Values constitute only one among several classes of factors that should be taken into account if one seeks to predict and understand human behavior.” (Williams, 1968, p.282)

4.2 Values and Norms

Values defined vis-à-vis a set of evaluative dimensions like good-bad, right-wrong, desirable-undesirable, appropriate-inappropriate, etc. are often confused with norms, or normative statement. However, while norms, or normative statements, contain evaluative dimensions via prescriptions, shoulds and oughts, they are specific to a particular situation context, whereas values can be conceptualised as more general oughts that transcend any one context (Kilmann, 1981, Burgess, 1992). Another important difference between values and social norms is that values can be internal or personal, social norms, on the other hand, are external and consensual (Burgess, 1992).

The distinction between values and norms is best summarised in the following deliberation by Williams (1968, p.284):

Norms are rules for behaving: they say more or less specifically what should or should not be done by particular types of actors in given circumstances. Values are standards of desirability that are more nearly independent of specific situations. The same value may be a point of reference for a great many specific norms: a particular norm may represent the simultaneous application of several separable values. Thus the value premise ‘equality’ may enter into norms for relationships between husband and wife, brother and brother, teacher and student, and so on; on the other hand, the norm ‘a teacher must not show favoritism in grading’ may in a particular instance involve the values of equality, honesty, humanitarianism, and several others. Values, as standards (criteria) for establishing what should be regarded as desirable, provide the grounds for accepting or rejecting particular norms. Thus achievement values, stressing active instrumental accomplishment against a standard of excellence, may be reflected in norms for sports, games,
occupational activities, community service, political life, education, science, and so on. The same principle holds for values considered as desirable objects or states: for example, a high positive evaluation of ‘freedom’ or ‘authority’ may be one of the grounds for a great many specific norms in various areas of society, culture, and personality. On the other hand, many norms are multivalued, relating simultaneously, for example, to hedonic criteria, consideration of efficiency, and values of social integration. A minor but clear case in point might be norms of etiquette for social dining.

4.3 Values and Attitudes

Behaviour may be viewed as a manifestation of attitudes and values (Connor and Becker, 1975). Attitude is “a lasting, general evaluation of people (including oneself), objects, or issues (Solomon, 2004). An attitude differs from a value in that an attitude refers to an organisation of several beliefs around a specific object or situation, whereas a value refers to a general belief of a transcendental kind (Rokeach, 1973). Attitudes do not act as standards; values do. Whereas the individuals may have many thousands of attitudes, applying to specific objects and situations, he may have only a few dozen values (Munson, 1984). In fact, Campbell (1950) defines attitudes in terms of the probability of the occurrence of a specific behaviour in a specified situation.

Schwartz (1994) refers to the five characteristics of values and suggests that values differ from attitudes primarily in their generality or abstractness and in their hierarchical ordering by importance.

Hofstede (1980) make predictions about relationships between cultural values and attitudes and behaviour, at cultural group level, however no empirical testing has been done by Hofstede. At the individual level, using structural equation modelling, Homer and Kahle (1988) showed that the causal relationship between values [measured by the List of Values (LOV, Beatty et al., 1985)] and consumer behaviour is mediated via attitudes.

5. Summary and Conclusions

Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1968) were the first to propose a central role for value in their metatheoretical model of consumer behaviour. However, it was not until the late 70s that the importance of values in the understanding of consumer behaviour received the attention that it deserved in marketing (Vinson et al., 1977). Howard (1977) suggests that terminal values and instrumental values are linked to product class participation and brand choice respectively. The first consumer behaviour model based on values was proposed by Sheth, Newman, and Cross (1991).

The relevance of values to consumer behaviour is well documented in the literature; comprehensive reviews can be found in Pitts and Woodside (1984), and various special journal issues (e.g., Psychology and Marketing, 1985, Journal of Business Research, 1990, Journal of Business Research, 1991).
Whereas studies have shown consistent relationships between values and various consumer behaviours, the strengths of such relationships tend to be modest. Some investigators have attributed weak relationships to measurement problems, particularly in cross-cultural contexts (e.g., Munson and McIntyre, 1979; Reynolds and Jolly, 1980; McCarty and Shrum, 1997). It is our contention, however, that apart from the lack of theoretical explanations of how values are causally related to other constructs in influencing consumer behaviour, the more fundamental reason lies in the lack of a clear understanding of the construct itself. It is only with better understanding of what are values (and what are not) that we can provide better theoretical explanation and prediction on how values influence consumer behaviour.

References


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