

VOCABULARY OF MOTIVES AND CONSUMER PURCHASE JUSTIFICATIONS

**Mohammed, Shazad M.
SUNY at Fredonia**

**Larson, David L.
SUNY at Fredonia**

ABSTRACT

C. Wright Mills wrote a seminal article on a non-psychological theory of motivation entitled, "Situating Actions and the Vocabulary of Motive." Mills was not interested in inner states of drives or needs. Rather his focus was with how people would articulate reasons for their actions in different social situations. People develop plausible articulated justification for their line of behavior. A related perspective is that of Stanford M. Lyman and Marvin B. Scott who developed a theory of accounts which are justifications/reasons/excuses for behavior. If other people ask for an explanation of one's behavior, accounts will more likely to be offered.

This exploratory study, using a student sample, seeks to determine to what extent consumers used specific justifications for buying a product. The research explores the range of the vocabulary of motives consumers use to justify purchases. The study will examine what type of products and situations are more likely to receive articulated motives. This is the first study in a larger research effort that will develop a typology of purchase justifications and review what types of consumers use them more and in what buying situations. The research should be of value to marketers who seek to understand the consumer's motivation process.

When faced with a purchase decision there are instances when a person is not fully convinced about buying the item. One such instance is where a person says in effect, I really want it, but I don't need it – how can I justify buying it? This dilemma may be strictly within the person themselves – they have to justify the purchase only to themselves. A second instance is where they sense important others (spouse, other family members, friends) may question their decision and they feel compelled to offer a stated justification or that one would be expected.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the degree to which consumers use justifications (stated motives) to themselves or others in their decisions to buy products. The theoretical literature on justifications is varied and growing. C. Wright Mills (1940) wrote a provocative essay entitled, "Situating Actions and Vocabularies of Motive." Mills was not concerned with psychological inner state of individuals such as drives and needs. His concern was with the ways people articulate their motives to themselves or others. For Mills, motives are typical vocabularies where actors vocalize and impute motives to themselves and others. "Rather than fixed elements 'in' an individual, motives are terms with which interpretation of conduct by social actors proceeds" (pp. 904).

Mills notes that motives and actions originate not internally from the individual but externally from the situation in which they find themselves. Situations have their set of vocabularies of motives, and this can be extended to institutions. It is expected that institutions such as law, medicine, military and sports would have motives readily at hand to justify lines of behavior. Consumers will have developed a collection of reasons to justify their purchase decisions. The vocabulary of motives for consumers would include those learned from parents who would have shared how their purchases were justified. Learned vocabularies of motives for different situations significantly shape behavior.

The idea of motives being statements that one gives to themselves, or to others, to support their actions has been elaborated in the literature on accounts. Scott and Lyman (1968) were the most explicit in elaborating how accounts are used in a variety of social settings. They defined an account as “a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry” (pp. 46). They identified two types of accounts that contain socially approved vocabularies; justifications, the person accepts responsibility but denies any negative aspects, and excuses; the person admits act is wrong but claims extenuating circumstances. The authors state both types are presented to others for the purpose of protecting self-esteem, social status, or social order.

In buying situations consumers realize that some purchases run the risk of being viewed as questionable or frivolous with the outcomes judged as foolish in the eyes of their peers and ultimately their own assessment of themselves. Their self-esteem is threatened. If they can find an acceptable account or justification that has current validity they can use it to buy the product in question, and their self-image is not threatened. Kivetz (1999) dealt with justifications using the concepts mental accounting and reason-based choice. Mental accounting is a cognitive process where people react differently depending on how things are labeled. People may feel less inhibited to spend money won in a lottery or acquired from an inheritance compared to money earned and saved from work income. Another way of justifying a purchase is to define it as an investment rather than a luxury expense. The purchase of an expensive work of art for example, would be easier to justify as an investment as opposed to simply saying that one likes it.

Kivetz (1999) also notes that a need to justify purchases tends to favor necessities at the expense of more frivolous items. An obvious corollary is that the purchase of non-necessities will require more justifiers than the purchase of necessities. Consumers will find it easier to buy luxuries when they can explicitly defend their purchase with written or verbal reasons or justifications (pp. 251). In a similar vein Okada (2005), noted it is more difficult to justify spending on hedonic goods and easier to justify spending on utilitarian products because, for hedonic, there is a greater sense of guilt associated and benefits are more difficult to quantify.

Burns and Perkins (1996) used the accounts framework to analyze post-purchase behavior, particularly suboptimal consumer choices. They explored how consumers would try to explain or justify a purchase mistake and eliminate the negativity associated with it. They note that psychology theorists feel that maintaining one’s self-esteem is a fundamental force in motivating an individual’s behavior. To be perceived as one who made a stupid purchase is a threat to their self-esteem, hence the need to find justifications for the purchase. The authors state, “Products have long been viewed as being an integral part of our “selves”...the self may be rooted to a greater extent in an individual’s possessions than in the individual. An individual’s self-concept, therefore, appears to be intrinsically tied to owned material possessions” (pp. 146). Burns and Perkins looked at justifications that were used to explain away instances of cognitive dissonance or purchase mistakes. The present exploratory study examines the role of justifications in current purchases.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 55 undergraduate students (28 males, 27 females) at a North Eastern University participated in this study for extra credit. They were asked to recall their thoughts for an actual purchase decision made in the last six to twelve months while answering the questions related to that purchase. Participants responded to the following questions, and unless indicated, all measures were open ended. They completed the questionnaire at their own pace, were thanked for their time, and then dismissed. The study questions are reproduced below.

1. How would you primarily describe yourself as a buyer? For example, do you consider yourself to be a careful shopper, price conscious, brand loyal, etc.
2. Are you loyal to certain brands of products and stores? Yes ___ No ___
3. Think of 3-5 brands you consider being loyal to. List them from most to least importance.
4. Considering your answer to the previous question, what is the most important reason you are loyal to the brands listed above?
5. When shopping do you sometimes say, “I want to buy this item but I really shouldn’t?” For example, you go back and forth in your mind before finally coming up with a justification to buy it such as “it is too good of a deal” or “I deserve it,” “you only live once,” etc. Please indicate how often this occurs for you:
Almost always ___ Often ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Never ___
6. Consider your answer to the previous question; think of one specific item this occurred for in the last 3 months. Identify it and what type of product it was.
7. List some of your justifications used for purchasing the item above.

FINDINGS

Responses to the self identification measure of buyer description yielded a pattern of respondents who were mostly price conscious in their purchase decisions (n=27 or 49%), followed by those who considered themselves to be brand loyal (n=11 or 20%). Almost a quarter of participants listed both price consciousness and brand loyalty as part of their shopping behaviors (n=13 or 24%). Four participants (7%) provided other identifiers such as “compulsive shopping where I buy what I want regardless of price, buying based on what was trendy, fashionable or new in tech, being attracted to what looks familiar or differently packaged goods, and being an impulse buyer.”

While brand loyalty produced half the main description of price consciousness, it was selected as an important influence in 93% (n=51) of participants with regards to products and stores. An examination of responses to the open ended brand loyalty measure found highly rated brands in product categories related to athletics (Nike), computer and electronics (Apple), grocery (Wegmans), beverages (Gatorade), clothing (American Eagle and Express), cosmetics (Dove), and automobiles (Honda). A more complete listing of the brand frequency is found in Table 1 below. Please note that were possible, brands were presented with the highest frequency in each category. Categories containing additional items are indicated by the superscript (^{1,2,3}).

Table 1
Loyal Brands

Athletics	Nike: 16	Under Armor: 3		
Computer & Electronics	Apple: 9	Sony:4	HP: 3	Microsoft: 2
Grocery, Department	Wegmans: 9	Topps: 3	Target: 2	
Beverages ¹	Gatorade: 6	Coke: 5	Pepsi: 4	Tim Hortons: 3
Clothing	A. Eagle: 4	Express 4	Gap:3	A. & Fitch: 2
Cosmetics ²	Dove: 4	Covergirl: 4	Clinique: 3	Crest: 3
Automobiles ³	Honda: 3	Ford: 2	Audi: 2	BMW: 2

With respect to the primary reason for loyalty, the main reason given was that prior usage of the brand led participants to being extremely satisfied. Other reasons identified pertained to positive perceptions of quality, consistency and superior comparable performance. Brand experiences were described as “the best experience, enjoyable and always excellent, affordable prices and I trust them, proven to be quality products, never let me down, consistent and reliable, superior to other choices.”

The questions regarding justifications, the main focus of this study, revealed a high frequency of participants who reported that justifications were used frequently. Responses to are summarized in Table 2

Table 2
Responses to Justification Measure (question #5)

Use justifications	Almost always	10 (18%)
	Often	29 (53%)
	Sometimes	13 (27%)
	Rarely	2 (3%)
	Never	1 (2%)

Participants were given a series of blank thought boxes and asked to give as many justifications as they wished for their purchase. Examination of the responses revealed that a large majority provided a minimum of four justifications (with at least 30% providing up to six justifications). This unexpected frequency, coupled with the finding that 79% said they “almost always” and “often” felt it was necessary to justify their purchases suggests the role of justifications in the purchase process has been greatly understudied. Further support is suggested by the fact that participants were able to easily recall four to five justifications for a specific purchase made in the last three months. To give the reader a closer sense of the data, the responses for five participants are presented below.

Case 1 “almost always” uses justifications. Bought a jacket with justifications:

- a. I deserve it.
- b. Needed something for the weekend.
- c. Never spend that much.
- d. Worked hard that week, reward myself

Case 2 “almost always” uses justifications. Bought a pair of boots with justifications:

- a. Still expensive but on sale, too good of a deal to pass up.
- b. Accepted onto presentation team and felt I deserved a treat.
- c. I worked hard during the summer and barely splurged on myself.
- d. Received a future internship and wanted to reward myself.

Case 3 “often” uses justifications. Bought a pair of jeans with justifications:

- a. Needed new pair.
- b. In price range.
- c. Look good, fit well.
- d. At mall which does not happen often, felt need to buy.

Case 4 “often” uses justifications. Purchased a purse with justifications:

- a. Haven’t gotten one in awhile.
- b. Use it often.
- c. Love it.

- d. 30% off coupon.

Case 5 “sometimes” uses justifications. Bought a pair of shoes with justifications:

- a. Reward for working hard.
- b. To cheer me up.
- c. Too good a deal to pass up.
- d. Would have regretted if I didn't.

An examination of the types of products participants used justifications for were: clothing (shirts, t-shirts, jackets, jeans, bathing suit, n=10), shoes (sneakers, boots, riding boots, n=6), video games (n=5), watches (n=4), movies (n=3), cellphone accessory (protective cases, n=3), vehicle (car, motorcycle, n= 3), sports (weights, hockey stick, football tickets, n= 3), purses (n=2), make up (n=2), television (n=2), computer (n=2), music accessory (guitar pedal, cymbal, n=2), food and beverage (soft drink, cookies, n= 2), firearm (n=2), vacation/event (skydiving, n=2), cellphone (n=1), and dvd player (n=1). Responses given for the justification of purchases (question #7) were used to develop our initial typology of purchase justification. Responses to the justification measure were coded and placed into one of the following categories:

1. Price Related: explanations that indicated a great deal or favorable price, price incentive such as a coupon or free shipping, a special sale, significant savings at the current price were the basis of justifying purchase.
2. Circumstance: explanations that suggested lengthy time since last purchase or reasoning related to buying a newer or unique version, restricted availability of the item or limited time for the purchase, the presence of extra money, needing to acquire for a specific purpose or replacement.
3. Emotional Reasons: explanations that presented the justification with an emotional basis such as participants feeling they deserved item, acquisition was a reward or they had earned it, a strong desire or a wanting for item, favorable feelings to ownership or motivations to splurge.
4. Frequent Usage: explanations that represented the basis of purchase was the result of regular or heavy use.
5. Suitability: explanations that viewed the durability or perceived quality as reasons, item was more appealing or professional looking, it suited their tastes or lifestyle, fit a goal, prior experience proved it was a good choice.

Exemplars of the typology categories are provided in Table 3 below and a more complete accounting is included in Appendix A.

TABLE 3
Exemplars of (Initial) Purchase Justification Typology

Price Related N= 43	A good deal compared to actual price, 25% off all accessories in store. Previously chose not to buy before discount, free shipping, all inclusive, had coupon, too cheap to pass up, save money, in price range, it was on sale, haven't found case this cheap yet, worth it, best on market, clearance.
Circumstance N= 64	Haven't gotten new one in awhile, limited time to purchase, old ones falling apart, just received a large paycheck, had extra cash, nicer than my old vehicle, out of product, can't find any like this locally so get them now, limited time sale, may not be able to find it later, weather is changing, need new shoes, don't have enough for use, need for it, for a good cause.
Emotional Reasons N= 57	Working all summer and didn't spend any money to do anything for myself, I deserve it, looks good, fun, really wanted it even though expensive, cute, excited about new features, felt I deserved to splurge on myself, earned it by saving for it, love it, fast and fun, really want it, would have regretted if I didn't, always wanted one, to cheer me up.
Frequent Usage N= 11	Use it often, use it a lot, go through a lot, will use it all the time, wear a lot, loyal fan and buy the new one each year, would not have to buy it for a while, an item I will use more than once, use more than any other item.
Suitability N= 38	Good quality, perceived it as better quality, pay more last longer liked, the style of it, these last a long time and can always use one, social reasons to be able to host events with others, like to experiment, fashionable, goes well with my outfits, great for exercise, wanted to take out a loan to build credit, used for years best product, experience will be worth the expense.

DISCUSSION

The major finding of our exploratory study is justifications are widely used in purchasing a broad range of products. This conclusion is based on two observations. Firstly, a large number (n=53 or 95%), of study participants reported having to utilize justifications in their recent purchases. Only 5% of our study participants reported they “rarely” or “never” used them. Interestingly, they did not limit these purchase justifications to discretionary or luxury products. Secondly, many were able to readily provide a fairly high number of justifications for what can be considered small to medium purchases in the last three months. The ability to recall that many justifications can be taken as indicative of their importance in the purchase process.

Because the number of responses exceeded expectations the key question (#5) was examined for any connotation or bias that would unduly stimulate responses. Question #5 begins by asking, “When shopping do you sometimes say, ‘I’ want to buy this...”. Alternative words for “sometimes” are “ever” and “usually”. There is no evidence that the word “sometimes” would push respondents to say they used justifications more than they actually do. Further analysis of Question #5 does not reveal any reason to indicate it stimulated an excessive response

Secondary findings of our exploratory study relate to the self-described “customer type”. Specifically, roughly half of the respondents self identified as being price conscious with respect to their purchase decision, with brand loyalty having a lesser, but no less important, presence. Another quarter of participants viewed themselves as both price conscious and brand loyal. These

responses serve to underscore the frequency of justifications discussed above as we have circumstances that essentially serve as a filter of buyer behavior operating. Taken together, it paints a picture of current consumers making purchase decisions not out of entitlement (e.g., this may be a questionable purchase but I deserve this), but rather one step beyond this emotional motivation (e.g., this may be a questionable decision but I worked hard and I really want/earned this). Another finding concerns the importance of loyalty to our participants. As indicated, a high degree of brand loyalty was involved in guiding our participants' choices. The relative benefit to extant business of providing positive purchase and consumption experience seems to outweigh the costs involved when one considers the favorable effect on repeat business and consumer attitudes. Loyalty is another key factor that consumers can rely on to successfully pass the filter of challenging purchase decisions. These are the broad implications from our first study that are best served with refinement from subsequent research considered below along with the study limitations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Beyond the normal reservations about external validity that accompanies research in non-field settings and whether findings based on one population segment generalize to others, limitations of this exploratory study are the small sample size and the lack of diversity. The findings do not provide information regarding the use of justifications by a full range of age cohorts and social categories. Future research should address this and refine and elaborate the typology of justifications. How would our consumer response vary where participants differentiate justifications for the purchase of everyday items or ongoing purchase decisions relative to products or services that are considered to be luxury items? The goal would be to have a typology of justifications that are used by consumers for different products and in different buying situations. Developing a demographic profile of the users of justifications is another goal of future research. When marketers have a fuller understanding of the role of justifications in the purchase process they can do a better job of meeting customer needs and expectations and do so more efficiently.

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**Appendix A
Responses To Justification Measure**

Justification 1	Justification 2
Have not bought game in a long time	Felt I deserved to splurge on myself
Beat all my games and needed something new	Had extra cash
Loyal fan for years, new game every year	Excited about new features
Play about 10 hrs week	Work hard and deserve it
Cheap	Found it on Craigslist
Love movies	Unbelievably good deal
Need for it.	Social reasons; be able to host movie nights
May not be able to find it - scarcity	Might be more expensive later
Good price	Just got out of surgery
Got it right when it was on the market and got an unlocked one which cost more	Didn't really need a new phone
Novelty item	Haven't bought in awhile
Too cheap to pass up	Time would run out on eBay if I don't buy it now
Only \$7.99	Favorite color
Opportunity only once	Earned it by saving for it
Bought it refurbished for lower cost	
Worked hard all summer for my money so I deserved to buy myself something I wanted	Gave my old TV to my little sister
Lot of money	Not necessity
Liked the style of the shirts	Perceived them to be of better quality
Liked the way it looked	Priced fairly
Had a coupon	It was on sale
Cute	Nothing else to wear out that night
Looks good	Deserve to get myself something nice
I deserve it	Needed something for weekend in Ellicottville
Wanted to buy something for memories	
Wear a lot of equipment	Worth buying
Needed new pair	In price range
Worked hard all summer	Never buy bathing suits for myself
Old ones falling apart	Haven't spent a lot on shoes in awhile
Wear a lot	Don't have enough for campus
Reward for working hard	Too cheer me up
Good quality	Sales price
Still expensive but on sale, too good of a deal to pass up	Accepted onto presentation team and felt I deserved a treat
A good deal compared to actual price	Have not bought myself something in a while
25% off all accessories in store. Previously chose not to buy before discount	Saving 25%
Wanted a different color to match more	Watches last a long time and can always use one
Really wanted it even though expensive	Good price
It wasn't a necessity	Rather save than spend
Will use it all the time	Cute
Haven't gotten new one in awhile	Use it often
Go through a lot	Like to experiment
Great deal	Use it often
Really wanted it	Nicer than my old vehicle
Need a mode of local transportation	Convenient way to travel short range
Best on market	Only best goes on this cycle
Clearance	Adjust between weights
Been over a year since I purchased a good stick	Use it a lot
Has to be year we're good	Most friends have purchased
Great deal	Just received a large paycheck
Last forever, never need to buy again	On sale, cheapest
Limited time to purchase	Positive results from a sample last year
Too good of deal to pass up	Eventually I'll use it all
I valued the firearm at resale over \$400 more than asking price	I had always wanted one. Here was my chance
Bored	Extra money to spend
Memories with friends	Fun
Always wanted to try and have a friend with them	Working all summer and didn't spend any money to do anything for myself

Responses To Justification Measure (continued)

Justification 3	Justification 4
Price was considerably cheap	Did not know the next time I would be in store
Really wanted 2 specific items	Had not other bills at the time or other big purchases to save for
Enjoy playing with friends	Feel like missing out if I don't
Combining money made it cheap	Could sell for profit
Almost become an addiction	I can keep these forever
Unable to watch movies without device	
Have not bought anything for self in a while	I wanted it
Been wanting to watch it recently	A movie I would watch more than once
Will keep it in good condition and sell back someday	
Student aid refund soon	Overtime at work
Haven't found case this cheap yet	Favorite color
Purchased in-store, no shipping	Would regret if I didn't
Aesthetically more appealing	Long and serving purchase
Needed something that looked better and was bigger	
What if I need that money later	
Money went to a good cause	
Wanted long shirt or wear with leggings	Only \$10
Rarely spend this much money on myself	
Never spend that much	Worked hard that week, reward myself
Use more than any item other than truck	
Look good, fit well	At the mall which does not happen often, felt need to buy
Pay more, last longer	Cashed check, extra money
Wear when it's cold	Haven't bought any in long time
Too good a deal to pass up	Would have regretted if I didn't
Size, comfort, color, length	
I worked hard during summer and barely splurged on myself	Received a future internship and wanted to reward myself
Upcoming trip and wanted to have them	Weather is changing, need new shoes
Having enough money	Wanting watch
Other ones were of lesser quality	
Fashionable	Goes well with outfits
Work hard, deserve it	Really want it
Love it	30% off coupon
\$10 off	Worth it
Last long time	Out of product
Good deal (roughly 30% less than KBB)	Wanted to take out a loan to build credit
Fast and fun	Great for exercise
Top of the line	
Save money	Wanted it for awhile
on sale	Other sticks have curve
Love tailgating	Love whole game day experience
Didn't need it, but really wanted it	
Went shopping on empty stomach	Distraction from an 'off' week
Can get three different kinds	
You can never have to many firearms	They hold their value, so it can't hurt
Weather	Last Spring break
The experience will be worth the expense	