

The Morphological Approach for Unconscious Consumer Motivation Research

DIRK ZIEMS

ifm In-depth Research +
Strategies, Cologne
(Germany) and New
York
d.ziems@ifm-network.de

Morphological psychology leverages the theory of Gestalt to understand the underlying fundamental, and often unconscious, motivating forces behind brand and product decisions. The Morphological concept of motivation makes it possible to account for the unconscious generators of consumer behavior appropriately. It reveals the hidden symbolic meaning of products. Marketing strategies should limit themselves to one key message—the concept of single-minded proposition—conveying one “core feeling” of “emotional value.” However, successful strategies consider the complex psychological mechanisms, which create the “emotional values.”

THE LACK OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS IN CONTEMPORARY MARKET RESEARCH

Despite the common wisdom that the economy, and with consumer behavior and marketing, are at least 50 percent determined by “psychology,” there generally exists a considerable lack of consistent psychological concepts.

Most marketing professionals do not have an elaborate and explicit idea of psychology. The “psychological factor” is often equated with a certain vagueness and irrationality of consumer motivations. In this view, a particular behavior that cannot be explained in terms of “normal” or “rational” is attributed to the “psychological factor.” To pinpoint this factor, a mix of explanations is offered, such as character formation, dualism of right and left hemisphere, or intercultural influences. However, at the end of the day, those explanations do not explain a lot, and successful marketing decision makers are simply believed to possess the ability to empathize particularly well with the psychology of the consumer. This ability is usually regarded as some kind of inborn gift.

At present, the concepts of in-depth psychology, which could shed some light onto the hidden mind of the consumer, are unfortunately only dealt with incompletely and inconsistently. This relative ignorance also applies to the fate of a

pioneer of in-depth psychological research on consumer motivation, Ernest Dichter. Dichter was a Viennese psychoanalyst who emigrated into the United States in the 1930s. Back then, his theories had a great impact on qualitative market research. However, in contemporary marketing and market research, they have been largely forgotten.

Dichter is of particular importance because he laid his focus on unconscious processes and mechanisms that govern the behavior of the consumer. Based on the theory of psychoanalysis, Dichter proposed that rational motives are merely a cover-up of unconscious, archaic motive complexes. He regarded objects and products of everyday life as symbols that stand for basic desires.

- In a survey on furs, Dichter pointed out that purchase and choice of the type of fur are prompted by archaic motives. In prehistoric times, men brought furs home to their women as hunting trophies, thereby proving their skill and potency. In modern civilization, the actual hunting is missing. But by paying a high price for a fur a man still proves his potency, i.e., financial power. Therefore, in principle, furs always have to be expensive and precious. However, nowadays there also exists a hierarchy and ranking among the types of fur that reflects the extent of (male) power. For

husbands of a clerical assistant, lamb fur may suffice, while the spouse of a suburban housewife may be expected to afford beaver. Mink ranks at the top because it symbolizes greater success and sophistication.

- In an early psychological in-depth study on the car market in 1939, Dichter described the symbolic meaning of car ownership and the unconscious processes that motivate the purchase of a car. He found out that car biographies run parallel to people's personal biographies. At around 20 years, the car symbolizes the longing for new beginnings and liberation ("just to drive off, anywhere, to Canada"). The daydreams of young drivers concern speed, potentials, and power. For young people, the car is a vehicle for trying out their own potential and a way of testing their own power. The car is also the vehicle for diverse rituals of impressing the female sex. At a more mature age (from approximately 35 onward), the values connected with the car experience a shift. Now, the focus lies on practicability and safety because the car has to fulfill the purpose of dealing with the burdens of everyday life and is responsible for the well-being of the family. The daydreams connected with cars are largely repressed and in some cases limited to a vague longing for a convertible, which represents the secret desire for a mistress.

Such fundamental insights are essential for practical merchandising and for advertising because the arguments used by advertisements only work when they take up the unconscious mechanism. Dichter understood this and developed marketing strategies that systematically targeted the unconscious, psychological factor.

- In the case of marketing fur, he recommended that less expensive furs should be taken out of the "firing line" and

that they should be marketed as seasonal fashion articles, as fun—not serious statements of status.

- Based on his study on cars, Dichter came to valuable conclusions about the special importance of dream cars within the car range of manufacturers, and about the selective emphasis on specific product features.

2. THE MORPHOLOGICAL APPROACH AS A CONTINUATION OF IN-DEPTH PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONAL RESEARCH

The approach proposed by ifm, the Morphological market psychology, has continued the tradition of psychoanalytic motive research and seeks to provide a broader, systematic theoretical background for the analysis of unconscious processes.

Morphological psychology was developed in the 1960s by Wilhelm Salber at the University of Cologne as an in-depth psychological theory, based on Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis. Christoph Melchers, the founder of the ifm, established morphology as an independent approach in the field of market research. As a theory of Gestalt formation and transition, the Morphological approach depicts the psychological background of everyday phenomena. It seeks to identify prototypical Gestalt patterns (core Gestalt) within everyday activities and the psychodynamic mechanisms that go along with this. The core Gestalt of enlargement and expansion, for instance, dominates everyday activities as diverse as driving a car, using a mobile phone, or performing home improvements. The core Gestalt of control, on the other hand, dominates activities such as cleaning or dealing with money. However, everyday activities are not created by just one leading core Gestalt but always have to negotiate an entire range of them. The expansion in home improvement activities meets its limits when we have reached the limitations of our poten-

tials. The more we want to tackle the dirt when cleaning (control), the more dirt we discover—and we may end up losing ourselves in endless cleaning activities.

The Morphological market psychology deals with products in terms of a Gestalt in motion, in which something like a psychological battle takes place. Hidden psychological meanings of products and brands can be discerned when regarded as a specific mediation within more general, fundamental psychological conflicts. Products and brands do not just serve a functional purpose for which they appear to be made. They regulate and negotiate—usually unconsciously—a more fundamental and more fundamentally motivating context.

This can be illustrated with the example of paper towels. On a surface, paper towels appear to be a practical help for efficient cleaning. Functional promises, such as soaking potential and firmness, dominate advertisements for them. However, a Morphological research project on them showed that the use of paper towels has to be understood in a much broader context—they are attributed with the magical potential to practically undo little accidents that occur in everyday life. The child has pushed over a glass of juice—"wipe and gone" ("*wisch und weg*"—"wipe and away"—is the claim for a German paper towel brand), and the nuisance has never occurred. The soaking potential of paper towel is to be understood symbolically: it virtually soaks up all the little accidents and irregularities of everyday life. In doing so, it helps pretend that some everyday conflicts never took place.

With this, paper towels can be used to solve conflicts within the family, as for instance the battle between unruly children and their orderly parents. One brand has recognized this function of paper towels and has used the promise of harmony as the core benefit in its advertisements. The paper towels of this brand have cute

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children's drawings and the writing "I love you" printed on them (exaggeration of the undoing of conflicts). The TV spots show loving and harmonious scenes between mother and child.

The Morphological concept of motivation makes it possible to account for the unconscious generators of consumer behavior appropriately. As the mentioned examples, cars, furs, and paper towels demonstrate, products always combine utility values with symbolic values. The utility values are often used for a rationalization of purchase and use, while the symbolic values express deeper, psychological motives. Successful products and brands manage to address both sides and offer ways of mediating between them.

The psychological theme that dominates many products these days is the addressing of an unconscious and preconscious longing for expansion. This may be the promise of a striking personal appearance via fashion brands or the promise of omnipotent control via internet, mobile phone, or credit cards. However, catering to the desires for expansion by various products leads to the widespread problem that consumers are carried away into a psychological dynamic that demands new kinds of regulation and control.

The following example of the use of mobile phones illustrates this: the mobile phone promises an expansion of people's individual presence. From a functional point of view, this is convenient for the user and makes some everyday tasks of

communication and organization easier. From a psychological point of view, the mobile phone speaks—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—to a deeper desire in the user to expand their importance and to possess all encompassing powers. They can interfere everywhere, from everywhere. They can contact people from a distance and control them. This desire for omnipotence is also reflected in the development of mobile phones that for a long time have not just been speaking devices but are able to do more and more: manage contacts and appointments, surf the internet, take photographs, soon also film movies, etc. The potential possibilities of control and influence via the mobile phone are thus steadily increasing.

The theme of omnipresence and omnipotence has a certain knock-on effect: by using the mobile phone frequently, people create their own sphere of communication, and soon they will not want to do without this any more. They wish to participate when something is going on, be close to others (via phone), always available. This gain of continuous presence can only be achieved by permanently phoning somebody and seeking for contact. For some users, this can take on the dynamic of an addiction. The felt necessity to prove one's own presence with the mobile leads to the phenomenon of frequent phone calls that are devoid of any content. People reduce their conversation on the phone to a mere giving of signals

such as "I'll be there in 10 minutes," "I am just driving around here," "just calling to say hello."

Those "content free" conversations on the mobile suggest a particular paradox connected with the communication via mobile phones. With their mobiles, people seek out an "immediate" contact while, on the other hand, always remaining at a distance. "Virtually," they are permanently present, but not in "reality" (omnipresence that never becomes present). Within the everyday use of mobile phone, this double presence leads to various disruptions of communication:

- The "virtual" contacts that are being maintained via the mobile phone do not suffice as substitution and consolation vis-à-vis a lost real presence. (Example: The frequent business traveler who, with the help of his mobile phone, pretends to still participate in family life, but who in reality is never around.) The lack of "real" presence is hereby overcompensated with more and more "content free" talk on the mobile, which usually consists of announcements of a "real" arrival somewhere.
- The "real" everyday activities and pursuits are permanently disrupted by "virtual" contacts made via mobiles. Whether they are in a meeting, watch TV, or doing some shopping, the call on the mobile will interrupt people in whatever they do. Essentially, this seems unavoidable because most people do not wish to drop out from their "mobile sphere," and would disconnect possible callers only for short periods of time.

ADVERTISING STRATEGIES ON THE BASIS OF MORPHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONAL RESEARCH

Compared to standard market research, the Morphological analysis of both moti-

vating factors and problems of everyday activities provides very different, fundamental insights for strategic directions of marketing and advertising.

Arguments proposed by advertisements that are derived from “nonpsychological” market research often remain on a superficially functional level. For example, some advertisements for paper towels emphasize the “USP” of their special firmness or their soaking potential. Because such a functional approach does not understand the psychological and symbolic meaning of the emphasized product features, there is no guarantee that those features are— from a psychological point of view— relevant. Therefore, a lot of advertisements that point out the functional benefits of a product drift past the consumer without making an impact.

By the same token, when market research identifies “emotional” benefits for a product such as control, freedom, and carefreeness, not much is gained if the motivational and psychodynamic background of a product is not understood. A benefit like “freedom” can, depending on the product, take on a completely different meaning. The sense of freedom when driving a car is completely different to the sense of freedom conveyed by wearing athletic shoes or the sense of freedom felt when using a credit card. In addition, when focusing on a certain emotion as part of a marketing strategy, it has to be taken into consideration which position and which importance this emotion holds within the motivational context. To discern this context, Morphological motivational research proposes a conception of conflicting motives that can never be conceived of as uniform and one-dimensional.

Within the European mobile phone market, it only seemed appropriate to focus on the “emotion” of an increased sense of freedom as long as the euphoria connected with the mobilizing of a new and powerful

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economy lasted (up until 2000). Soon the motivational context of using mobiles experienced a shift: Worries about overcommitment and about overstretching one’s limits as well as disappointment caused by the “virtuality” of contacts via mobile phones (since 2002, see above). Product and marketing strategies that do not take those mostly unconscious processes into account are in danger of operating with one-dimensional and oversimplistic quasi-emotional categories.

For instance, advertisements that keep concentrating on the euphoria of freedom and independence provoke a counterreaction in the consumer such as: “This is over the top. It is not realistic. Be careful and hands off!” As a result, even tariff names such as “Time & More” arouse suspicion. On the other hand, mobile phone advertisements that move a promise of control into the foreground are soon dismissed as a misleading appeasement. In this context, assurances like “guaranteed control of costs” are understood as the attempt by the provider to entice people with an exploitative contract.

In contrast to this, the marketing concept proposed by the mobile provider O2 proved to be more successful. It shows the reality of the mobile as a world inside a water bubble in which testimonials and mobile phones drift around in calm movements. The Morphological analysis of this advertisement suggests that this illustration of the mobile phone world deals with the unconscious desires of mobile users very

accurately. For it demonstrates that the mobile in fact creates its own, secluded sphere, which is separated from “reality” (see above). The diving into the water sphere of O2 seems particularly appealing because the images convey an archaic sense of calm and comfort (see Figure 1).

The O2 campaign is, compared to other cell phone advertisements, revolutionary because it moves the focus from the topic “communication” (taken up by all other providers) toward the subject “enjoyment of the virtual, solipsistic, mobile phone sphere.” With this, it addresses the unconscious motivation of mobile phone users much more accurately, and



Figure 1 Advertising of the Mobile Phone Provider O2

its message does not collide with the experienced difficulties encountered when communicating via mobile phone (a problem of all other mobile phone campaigns, which are fixated on unconvincing promises such as "intense closeness," "liberation," or "control"). However, the focus on the "virtual phone sphere" is not sustainable over a long period of time. After the subject has been shown for almost two years, it creates the impression of isolation and stagnation.

Undoubtedly, marketing strategies should limit themselves to one key message (the concept of single-minded proposition). Consequently, they should convey one "core feeling," i.e., "emotional value" (as in O2: a secluded world of comfort and calm). However, behind this "emotional value" lies a complex strategy of dealing with motivational problems that constitute the use of a certain product. A brand is successful when it manages to offer a feasible mediation within structural, motivational conflicts.

Morphological research on brands pursues these ideas and investigates precisely which mechanisms and strategies are propagated by brand images, in connection with the motivational background.

In a survey on credit card use in the United States, ifm proposed that it is the interchange between omnipotence fantasies (to turn into a "momentary millionaire" with the credit card) and the necessity of control (temptation to buy gets people into debt), which determines the dynamic and the dramatic of credit card use.

The different credit card brands show more or less convincing ways in which the motivational conflict, namely, striving for and at the same time controlling unlimited possibilities, can be negotiated.

- VISA decisively focuses on the pole of extension of personal possibilities. This becomes evident alone in the name

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"Visa," which hints via the association passport at travels and traveling. In various advertising campaigns, VISA has communicated the message: with the VISA card you are always prepared and you can pay anywhere. With the VISA card you can experience more freedom. One advertising spot, for example, shows a woman who swims ashore dressed in just a bathing suit, enters a store, and pulls out her VISA card. But the message of personal freedom has also made VISA into a brand very close to the element of seduction, which makes control over use of the card more difficult.

- In this context, MasterCard, with its "Priceless" campaign, has managed to link the credit card with a message that keeps its distance from feelings of seduction and comes across as responsible and adult. The "Priceless" campaign features not the self-absorbed devotees of consumption but rather fathers, husbands, etc., whose buying behavior is nearly selflessly oriented toward others. Thus the credit card brand communicates: Money can't buy you happiness, but MasterCard can help you to become a good provider.

THE MEANING OF SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS IN ADVERTISEMENTS

When analyzing brands and advertisements, one frequently encounters appealing symbols such as the waterworld in O2 or ideal prototypes such as the respon-

sible father figures in the "Priceless" campaign from MasterCard. Morphological psychology identifies the intrinsic logic of these images and examines the correspondence between the image and the motivational structures it may address. Hereby, it raises the question as to whether an image meets "the certain something" of the product use or whether it remains disconnected with the motives.

Athletes who take pain relievers to get back in form are a popular "subject" in American advertising for pain relievers. The quarterback whose joints are already damaged and who gets himself fit for the game with a good dose of pain reliever epitomizes this. Sports and sportsmen symbolize the topic of performance in general.

Morphological research has identified that the ethos of "performance orientation," which is predominant in the United States, is the major motivating factor behind this attitude: Knowing that others depend on you, you "soldier on" rather than giving in to the pain. As a consequence, Americans take OTC pain relievers apparently without "hardly stopping to think."

In Germany, however, it would be a very dangerous move to show pill-popping athletes in advertisements for pain relievers. Germans tend to regard the display of pills as a means of suppressing the pain as irresponsible because the pain could be pointing toward something more serious and people should not be negligent toward their health.

In a research project on fashion in the United States, ifm suggested that the lingerie chain Victoria's Secret (VS) very successfully manages to deal with the image of a Victorian attitude toward sexuality and to develop this for modern times. The Morphological motivational research on the use of lingerie demonstrated that in many cases American women still adhere to a comparatively prudish sexual ethos. The sexual attitude has become much more relaxed, but a very open display of sexiness and female attributes still appears rather daring and unfamiliar. According to the Victorian attitude toward sex, aspects of sexuality, which would go over the limit when brought out into the open, can flourish when kept hidden (secret).

Precisely this mechanism is adopted by Victoria's Secret. It communicates to its customers: "Our lingerie allows you to experiment with your own sexuality in secret." In in-depth interviews with customers, it became evident that custom-

ers use VS lingerie for exactly this purpose of experimenting "in secret." For instance, they tell you that under ordinary and casual clothing, they "secretly" would wear a particularly provocative VS bra or panties, which would make them feel particularly good about themselves. VS manages to develop the lingerie motives further: It does not appear saucy or sleazy at all, but on the contrary it makes one feel proud, strong, and confident (reinforced by advertisements with particularly strong and powerful supermodels). The woman who wears VS can feel particularly strong, precisely because she hides the VS lingerie and only wears it for herself and for her own feeling of self-worth.

Those examples demonstrate: Knowledge about psychological images and psychological fundamental structures broadens the horizon of motivational market research immensely and enables marketers to create better and more appropriately targeted advertisements.

The Morphological motivational research and advertising research open up new methods of uncovering crucial unconscious psychological processes and mechanisms. With this, it carries forward a long-neglected psychological tradition and makes use of it in an innovative, very practical manner. 

DIRK ZIEMS is managing partner of the Morphological market research institute, in-depth Research + Strategies. After he completed his degree in in-depth psychology and Morphology at the University of Cologne and joined the ifm institute, he specialized in motivational research. He has implemented projects for a variety of clients, including P&G, Deutsche Telekom, Whirlpool Europe, and Otto Catalog. His research also brought him to the United States where he did Morphological motivational surveys for Spiegel Catalog and Eddie Bauer. Under his leadership, in 2002 ifm entered into cooperation with the qualitative market research firm Richard Kurtz & Assoc. in New York.