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Book Review

Signaling Style, Substance, and Smarts: An Evolutionary-Informed Perspective on Consumer Motivation

A review of Geoffrey Miller, *Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior*. Viking: New York, 2009, 374 pp., US\$26.95, ISBN 978-0-670-02062-1 (hardcover)

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In Dr. Suess's classic children's story, "The Sneetches," two groups exist in a population and have only superficial differences in appearance--members of one group sport a star on their bellies, while members of the other group do not. The Sneetches without "stars upon thars" are socially excluded by those who do, and mope about lamenting their lack of visible status. Soon, however, this class system is subjected to the marketing genius of one Sylvester McMonkey McBean, who offers those without stars the opportunity to purchase a counterfeit star that renders them indistinguishable from their superior out-group members. Of course, the original "stars upon thars" crew are exasperated by this counterfeit star scheme. This enhances their motivation to pay even more Sneetch dollars to Mr. McBean to remove their stars and hence restore their uniqueness and prestige. This arms race for differentiation continues until Sneetches of both groups go bankrupt, and Mr. McBean laughs his way out of town with all their money.

In *Spent*, the role of marketing in society is not portrayed in such an exploitative manner, and humans are clearly not as unmotivated as the Sneetches. Humans are, however, susceptible to modern marketing techniques to the extent that they play upon key motivations to seek pleasure and display favorable traits to others (such as intelligence, or agreeableness). Miller extensively explores these two motivations for consumption, and their connection to evolutionary concepts of reproductive fitness and success. Taking a costly signaling perspective to understand the motivation for display, the book probes what it is exactly that humans look for in their associates, and what traits we seek to display in marketing ourselves to our confidantes, superiors and subordinates, kin, potential romantic partners and current mates. After all, each relationship an individual seeks to secure and maintain involves an opportunity cost for the other party, requiring we exhibit a continual stream of favorable displays to convince the other person we are worthy of their investment. In a developed market economy, and those on the verge of

becoming one, the products and services people consume and display are an intrinsic part of this persuasion process.

Geoffrey Miller's notion that we might advertise our fitness by tattooing our central six scores (big five personality scores, plus IQ) somewhere on our bodies prompts us to imagine a simplified alternative reality to modern consumer culture. In such a world, signaling would be accomplished not via conspicuous consumption (with ample opportunity for deceptive advertising), but by inking six numbers onto a visible body part. Of course all tattoo artists would have to become certified in assessment, but those are details to be worked out later. Such playful and outrageous thought experiments prompt the reader to question the fundamentals of our collective obsession with consumption, and to think about the myriad ways our evolved psychology might influence what we buy, and why.

Much like Miller's earlier book, *The Mating Mind*, this is a book of ideas. Miller does review some relevant research on consumer motivation and behavior from an evolutionary perspective (unfortunately, there isn't much yet to review), so the book is primarily a synthesis of psychological perspectives applied conceptually to examine consumer behavior. Considering the numerous empirical papers inspired by *The Mating Mind*, we have no doubt that researchers interested in biological influences on consumption will also be encouraged by *Spent* to think differently about their work, and to test some of Miller's ideas. The signaling of personality traits and intelligence through consuming products and services is a central thesis of the book, providing the integrative framework from which many of Miller's hypotheses and thought experiments are drawn.

In marrying personality psychology with evolutionary biology, *Spent* takes us on an entertaining and intellectually stimulating tour of modern marketing techniques, and the consumer desires these efforts are designed to fulfill. Miller's two key motivations for consumption—to signal favorable traits to others, or enhance one's personal pleasure—become more intricate as he considers phenomena such as faking one's fitness, and simulating otherwise unattainable fitness-relevant outcomes via purchased “experiences.” While the reader may not always agree with Miller's alignment of specific products and their meanings (i.e., what is being conveyed by the signal), it is interesting to decompose one's brand preferences and purchase motivations in terms of the big five, and other desirable traits one's possessions and purchases might project.

While those versed in sexual selection and costly signaling theory may find some of these ideas about consumer behavior to be logical correlates of other well-documented forms of display behavior, it is important to recognize how novel some of these theoretically informed ideas are to both marketing academics and practitioners. Few marketing academics receive any substantive training in biological theory or personality psychology, and popular consumer behavior textbooks used to educate the hoards of marketing majors rarely if ever mention biologically-based influences on behavior or cognition. Miller's insights encourage thinking that could potentially bridge the gap between business and biology, and enhance our understanding of the motivation behind consumption. For those who find the search for evolved bases of human cognition and behavior a fascinating endeavor, consumption is a sometimes overlooked 800 pound gorilla. Much of our typical days, and many of our social exchanges and interactions, involve planning for and deciding how to allocate scarce resources (e.g., time, money, energy) to the purchase, consumption and disposition of products and services for ourselves and our close others. As Miller reminds us, there is a lot of work to be done here.

Style, Substance and Smarts

Who would benefit from reading *Spent*? Rife with thought-provoking arguments, insight into the mind of the consumer, and suggestions for how anyone who would like to can take his or her rampant consumerism down a notch, this book should have broad appeal to those interested in buyer behavior. It is elegantly and engagingly written, and fans of *The Mating Mind* will also find this book a pleasure to consume. For evolutionary researchers interested in Sneetch-like consumerism and what it might teach us about human behavior, this book can stimulate reflection, discussion and perhaps some novel research ideas. Although readers do not need to be intimately acquainted with Darwinian theory, an understanding of basic evolutionary psychology would help one to fully understand all of Miller's arguments (and some of his jokes).