



## Spent.

Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior

Geoffrey Miller

# Book Spent

## Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior

Geoffrey Miller

Viking, 2009

Listen now

- play
- pause

00:00

00:00

## Recommendation

Evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller examines modern consumer culture through a scientific lens. The result is thought-provoking, useful and often witty, but a bit uneven. Miller does a fine job of explaining evolutionary psychology and, especially, of showing how the endless purchases that define “consumerist capitalism” come from an unacknowledged need to demonstrate physical characteristics or personality traits to others. This section of the book will interest anyone seeking original social critique. The highly focused discussion of the “Central Six” personality traits provides a stable foundation for evaluating other people or marketing to them. The final section, in which Miller proposes social alternatives to consumerism, challenges existing culture, but is not nearly as convincing (or, strangely) as witty as the earlier sections. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to marketing and human resources professionals, and to any reader who wants to think deeply about the foundations of societies and their economies.

## Take-Aways

- Evolutionary psychology offers new perspectives on economic activities.
- People rarely purchase something to get the item itself. Instead, they are sending a signal.
- They buy specific items to signal health, reproductive fitness or personality traits.
- Six characteristics define people. The most important is “general intelligence.”
- The other traits in the “Central Six” are: “openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, stability and extroversion.”
- Intelligence is a universal good. Context determines the other five traits’ value or meaning.
- These six characteristics predict how consumers will act and what they will buy, but most marketers don’t know that – and don’t sell based upon it.
- Marketing is a sweeping cultural revolution that provokes major societal change.
- Trying to send the right signals about your personality by buying things people might regard favorably is expensive, time consuming and ineffective.
- Alternatives to “consumerist capitalism” include taxation policies that encourage people to reduce expenditures, save money and reuse products.

## Summary

### Evolutionary Psychology, Marketing and “Consumerist Capitalism”

Why do people buy certain items, particularly really expensive, impractical things, like the Hummer H1, which costs \$139,771 and gets 10 miles per gallon? The answer resides in biology, in the specific context in which humanity evolved. During most of history, people lived in “small social groups” where displaying status was crucial to surviving, snagging a mate, and defeating rivals and enemies. Although you may work in an office, not a forest, your entire being is designed to act as if you

still lived in a tribal setting. That means when you buy something, you rarely do so to obtain that thing itself. Instead, you buy it to send a message to your peer group.

“Many products are signals first and material objects second.”

Humans are ruled by instincts below the level of consciousness. These instincts drive you – and everyone else – to display certain traits. How those traits manifest differs from culture to culture and by social norms, but in a modern consumerist capitalism society, you express them by buying items that send specific messages. This perspective challenges ideas across the political spectrum about both capitalism and marketing. For example, consumerist capitalism is not the natural result of human nature at work in free markets, as many conservatives and libertarians may argue. Nor do people consume because of destructive ideology or institutional deception, as some radicals might say. Instead, the entire fervor of the market is just one cultural method among many that human beings use to find one another, reproduce and shape communities.

“Consumerist capitalism produces almost everything that is distinctively exciting about modern life and almost everything that is appalling about it.”

Marketing professionals who think consumers buy things to show off are often wrong about what people are trying to display. Marketers think people want to flaunt “wealth, status and taste,” and may miss that people are trying to demonstrate more fundamental traits, such as “kindness, intelligence and creativity.” Through their purchases, people are trying to broadcast “fitness indicators” to draw potential mates and get people to like and help them. Marketers and executives misinterpret this behavior because they’re working with incomplete models of humanity. They may see the human psyche as a “blank slate” upon which culture imposes patterns. It isn’t: Culture imposes patterns, but those patterns shape pre-existing drives that evolved over the years. Even marketers who are trained in psychology tend to cling to outmoded concepts like Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which is based on an inconsistent structure and tends to muddy biological needs with socially created desires.

“What democracy is to politics, consumer demand is to business: the fulcrum with which ordinary people have the most leverage on how their world is organized.”

Many marketers fail to understand consumers, despite marketing’s power and genius. “Markets themselves are ancient,” but marketing is a recent breakthrough. Before the 20th century, companies produced goods and then tried to get people to buy them. In the age of marketing, producers research what people want and then sell it to them. These items are rarely the necessities of life; instead, they are products that confer pleasure or status or, often, both.

## The “Central Six” Human Characteristics

Throughout history, people have developed systems to classify human nature. These systems range from Galen’s four humors, popular in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, to numerous 20th-century theoretical structures of “personality dimensions.” While theories come and go, in recent decades a consensus has emerged – built on empirical studies – about six traits that are likely to stand the test of time. The most important characteristic is “general intelligence,” followed by “openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, stability and extroversion,” all captured by the acronym “GOCASE.”

“Fitness indicators are signals of one individual’s traits and qualities that are perceivable by other individuals.”

If you know people’s general intelligence, you can predict how they’ll do in school, in their careers and in life overall. Some thinkers attack the general intelligence concept, saying that the tools used to quantify it (like IQ tests) are culturally biased. However, scientists have conducted considerable empirical research that firmly positions intelligence as the central factor in human identity. It may be politically explosive to say so, but contemporary intelligence tests are fairly free of bias. Average intelligence varies and should be viewed as “an individual-differences construct – like the constructs ‘health,’ ‘beauty’ or ‘status’.”

“At the micro level, many products thrive because they are associated with agreeable personalities and activities.”

The well-intentioned desire to create a more egalitarian culture has generated some objections to intelligence testing. However, other competing systems for signaling intelligence permeate society. In the U.S., obtaining an Ivy League education is a long-established method of signaling high intelligence (and, thus, superior attractiveness as a mate). Inexpensive intelligence tests that can do the same thing challenge the highly lucrative cultural monopolies of schools like Harvard and Yale. Beyond testing and formal credentials, the economy is rich with products people can buy to demonstrate intelligence: educational travel and toys, strategy games, foods labeled as “smart” and even drugs (legal or illegal) for gaining an intellectual edge. The “feature creep” that makes products like cellphones more complex can signal intelligence (even as it reduces those items’ utility).

“As a self-display strategy, it is very inefficient to buy new, branded mass-produced products from stores at the full manufacturer’s suggested retail price.”

Intelligence is a generally accepted good. Mostly, the smarter you are, the better. Intelligence is distributed on a bell curve: The majority of people fall near the center, while a few have very high or very low intelligence. The other five personality traits are distributed across a similar curve, but its meaning is different. In an area like “openness,” whether you want a high or low rating may depend on a number of cultural, individual, sexual and chronological factors. These personality factors still function as fitness signals, though more nuanced ones. For example, a low level of conscientiousness may be an agreeable message from a short-term sexual partner, but not from a possible mate.

“While marketing is central to modern culture, the consumerist mind-set is central to marketing.”

The remaining five major characteristics can be defined as follows:

1. **Openness** – If you have a high level of openness to new experiences, you are curious and tolerant, and willing to break with tradition. You value novelty and complexity. If you rate low in this area, you’re more conventional and tend to emphasize tradition, the past and clear lines of hierarchical authority. High openness and high intelligence are mildly correlated, as are openness and bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Some industries, like fashion, both depend on openness and signal it, as do some marketing tactics (like aiming a product at early adopters) and larger economic practices, like “planned obsolescence.”
2. **Conscientiousness** – If you are highly conscientious, you are responsible. You restrain yourself, exercise willpower, plan ahead, build a strong social network

and use focused, organized action to achieve your goals. At the extreme edge, conscientiousness shades over into obsessive-compulsive disorder. If, by contrast, you are low in conscientiousness, you're more spontaneous, less ambitious and more accepting. You act on impulse, even instinct, and want to have fun – now. Juveniles tend to rank low in conscientiousness and older people tend to rank high. Historically, those in power preferred the lower classes to be conscientious and socialized them accordingly. Contemporary marketers capitalize on this personality trait by portraying youthful rebellion as cool, and mature responsibility as boring. Buying “high-maintenance products” like fragile antiques signals conscientiousness, as does having a fancy kitchen or a pet that needs continual tending. A good credit rating and a formal education both demonstrate high conscientiousness.

3. **Agreeableness** – If you rank high in agreeableness, you're kind, warm and trusting. A saint would be an extreme high example; a psychopath would rank very low. These points on the agreeableness scale align with conventional moral judgments, which say it is good to be nice and bad to be rude, cruel and cold. However, some cultural contexts paint low agreeableness positively; think of the attractive “bad boy.” People who are highly agreeable tend to give, while those who are not tend to take. Young males tend to display low agreeableness behavior, like taking risks and driving loud cars. As they mature, they become more agreeable. People who conform are displaying agreeableness, as are those who embrace compassionate ideologies. Such philosophies signal positive internal qualities (for instance, to potential mates).
4. **Stability** – If you rank high in emotional stability, you stay calm in the face of challenges and bounce back quickly when things go wrong. You can handle stress, and you're likely to be satisfied with your life. If you're low in stability, you tend to have emotional swings, and get depressed and self-conscious. You might even suffer from some “internalizing” mental conditions like anxiety.
5. **Extroversion** – Extroversion measures how social and outgoing you are. If you're an extrovert, you like to talk and express yourself openly and actively. You tend to be confident interacting with people. If you're introverted, you'd rather work alone, don't trust easily, and don't seek leadership jobs or high status. Introverts tend to be passive.

“Almost all advertisements appeal to status seeking, or pleasure seeking, or both.”

These six characteristics are independent; you can score high in one and low in another. Those who are aware of these traits can use them to predict people's activities in areas from sex to politics. For example, highly promiscuous people tend to be extroverted, while chaste people are conscientious; liberals are more open and agreeable than conservatives, but less conscientious; and so on. People are most comfortable with those who share their traits or the traits they desire in a mate. These Central Six can also predict how people will spend money – but most marketers don't know that.

## Dangers of Consumerist Capitalism – and Some Alternatives

Consumerist capitalism makes countless goods available. Under this system, you can buy, use or rent just about any product you can think of to signal your inner qualities to your community and potential mate. However, using consumer products as indicators of reproductive fitness is problematic. First, these products take effort to acquire; they are often expensive and wasteful. More importantly, these products usually fail as signals. People buy a car or even adopt a political philosophy because they think it reveals their inner selves, only to find that others misread their intentions or don't even notice. And if you lack youth or intelligence, no product, no matter how superior, can signal their presence – at least not in the long run. The passing of time always reveals real intelligence and age.

“There are as many types of status as there are types of individual differences between people.”

What's more, the forces that drive consumerism can be psychologically dangerous. Two consumerist culture engines – “public status seeking and private pleasure seeking” – are manifestations of a psychological condition called “narcissism.” A society that “fetishizes” youth (that is, reproductive fitness) may fail to listen to more mature voices, thus putting its culture out of balance. Focusing on materialism also puts humans out of balance as individuals, emphasizing the external rather than the internal. And in the effort to express themselves, folks often buy consumer goods they don't need. People used to communicate their underlying traits to one another perfectly well without the latest car or complicated cellphone.

“Conspicuously displayed aesthetic taste is a convenient, visible way for people to display their deeper personality traits.”

Consider some alternatives to the consumerist culture. Don't run to buy the latest product. Instead, make do with what you have, wait a while, borrow it, buy it used (or generic) or rent it. These cheaper choices signal your inner qualities just as well. You could even make an item yourself, or hire a local artist to create it. Using such options would produce stories that signal character traits even better than the objects themselves. Humans who must display their traits could do so directly, not indirectly. “Trait tattoos” could broadcast your Central Six directly to others, making it easy to find high-intelligence individuals who share your desired characteristics. A number of social alternatives also beckon. Since “informal social norms” greatly influence how people act, you could lead your peer group toward making it cool to consume less, perhaps by talking to your friends directly about their purchasing choices.

“We put too much of ourselves into our product facades, spinning too much mass to our outer edges where we hope it is both publicly visible and instantly loveable.”

Laws that forbid home sellers to discriminate against buyers on the basis of religion, sexual orientation or ethnicity make it impossible for communities of like-minded individuals to gather voluntarily. With some changes in such laws, people who share characteristics and, perhaps, values, could cluster. Then, they could focus on other elements of forming a community, instead of having to signal their traits with continual consumerist displays. Such communities would also function as social experiments. Another way to repel the consumerist culture would be for governments to rework their tax structures to encourage people to save by taxing what they spend instead of what they earn. Tax policy could reward reuse, or reflect all of an item's inherent costs (for example, bullets would be much more expensive).

## About the Author

**Geoffrey Miller** is author of *The Mating Mind* and a professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of New Mexico.

---