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Review Paper

Appetitive Motives and Aversive Motive among Young Adults: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

The present systematic review synthesizes existing literature on appetitive and aversive motives among young adults within the framework of the Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory. The review was conducted following the guidelines to ensure a systematic and transparent selection of studies. It examines empirical findings related to motivational tendencies and gender differences in reinforcement sensitivity. The literature indicates that appetitive and aversive motivational systems play an important role in shaping approach–avoidance behavior, emotional regulation, and decision-making. However, findings regarding gender differences remain inconsistent and appear to be influenced by sociocultural and developmental factors. The review also highlights the limited number of studies conducted in the Indian context, indicating the need for further culturally relevant research. Overall, the findings suggest that appetitive and aversive motives may operate similarly across genders in certain populations, emphasizing the need for further systematic investigation among young adults.

Keywords: *Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory, Motivation, Appetitive Motives, Aversive Motives, Gender Differences*

Motivation represents the yearning to accomplish a task, paired with the enthusiasm and determination to see it through. It acts as the driving force that propels an individual to take proactive steps and reach their goals. Motivation, the psychological construct 'invented' to describe the mechanism by which individuals and groups choose behaviour and persist with it, has a history going back millennia in all cultures (Bandura, A. 1977). Many theories have been developed over the decades that have tried to answer the question of where the motivation originates, how it is maintained and the reason individuals vary in their desire to perform specific tasks. The model of the Behavioral Activation Systemic motivational theory is grounded on the general model of motivation by Heckhausen and Heckhausen (2018) to introduce the universal characteristics of motivated human action. The Expectancy value theory is based on the research conducted by Tolman (1932) and Lewin (1951), wherein motivation is depicted as the result of the feasibility and

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desirability of an anticipated action. Further, the Social cognitive theory is much broader than self-efficacy and outcome expectations and assumes a system of interacting personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021). The Attribution theory addresses the issue of how individuals make causal ascriptions about events in the environment. Persons act like intuitive scientists searching for the perceived causes of success and failure (Graham & Taylor, 2016). The Achievement goal theory gives base to the fundamental distinction between individuals concentrating on the process of learning and individuals focusing on the external reasons for learning, can also be found in achievement goal theory (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). The theoretical framework has evolved steadily over four decades and is nowadays a key approach in motivation research.

Furthermore, Achievement goals can be characterized by the intention to engage in competence-related behaviors. To further develop achievement motivation theory called attention to two types of achievement behavior. Task-oriented individuals pursue the goal of developing high abilities. Ego-oriented learners care deeply about proving high abilities to themselves or others and avoid demonstrating low abilities. Additionally, there are mainly two types of motivation namely Intrinsic motivation and Extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence. The phenomenon of intrinsic motivation was first acknowledged within experimental studies of animal behavior, where it was discovered that many organisms engage in exploratory, playful, and curiosity-driven behaviors even in the absence of reinforcement or reward (White, 1959). There is considerable practical utility in focusing on task properties and their potential intrinsic interest, as it leads toward improved task design or selection to enhance motivation. Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done to attain some separable outcome. Extrinsic motivation thus contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value. Although intrinsic motivation is clearly an important type of motivation, most of the activities people do are not, strictly speaking, intrinsically motivated. This is especially the case after early childhood, as the freedom to be intrinsically motivated becomes increasingly curtailed by social demands and roles that require individuals to assume responsibility for no intrinsically interesting tasks.

Moreover, motives refer to the psychological forces that stimulates, guides and maintains behavior in a direction. The question that they address is why do we act? The reasons may be biological (because of hunger or security), psychological (because of success or belonging), or social. All in all, motives are the drivers of behavior, and they steer it into certain directions until the goal is attained. Motives can be categorized into appetitive motives and aversive motives in a broad way depending on the direction they offer to a human behavior. Appetitive motives motivate people to approach, pursue, and achieve rewarding or pleasurable results like success, acceptance or contentment and in this way encourage goal-directed and approach-oriented behavior. These motives are fundamentally approach-oriented, meaning they direct behavior toward desirable goals rather than away from negative outcomes. In psychological terms, appetitive motives represent the “seeking” side of human motivation—the tendency to pursue gratification, comfort, pleasure, satisfaction, and the fulfilment of internal needs or desires. These motives are essential for adaptation and growth since they align personal desires with purposeful action. (Jackson & Smillie, 2004). On the other hand, Aversive motives cause individuals to withdraw, escape or minimize unpleasant or threatening situations resulting in withdrawal, caution or defensive behavior. The two kinds of motives thus act in synchrony to control behavior by

balancing between positive and negative consequences pursuit. They direct behavior away from threats, discomfort, pain, or any experience perceived as dangerous, stressful, or undesirable. In essence, aversive motives serve a protective and defensive function, helping individuals minimize harm and maintain psychological and physiological safety. These motives are crucial to survival, adaptation, and emotional regulation, as they prepare individuals to recognize risks and act in ways that prevent negative outcomes. (Jackson & Smillie, 2004)

Rationale

The study of the variations in appetitive and aversive motives among young adults is paramount to the investigation of how different individuals control their actions, react to stimuli in environmental conditions, and form the emotional and motivational patterns, which have an impact and determine their life courses. Theoretical and empirical evidences have been strong to indicate that males and females could be different in appetitive and aversive motivational orientations. The empirical findings in the research carried out by different researchers are not consistent, and any motivational gender differences can depend on different cultures, age groups, and the context.

To the best knowledge of the student researcher only two published research work could be found till date in the Indian context, the present work is therefore an attempt to fill this gap. In general, this paper aims to make significant contributions to the motivational psychology field, gender studies, and development in young adults. Finally, the study is of high importance in terms of learning about how young adults can cope with difficulties, follow ambitions, and manage emotions at a transitional period of their lives.

METHODOLOGY

The present systematic review was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure a systematic and transparent review process. Relevant literature on appetitive and aversive motives within the framework of Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST), Behavioral Activation System (BAS), and Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) was identified through online academic sources including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and reference lists of relevant studies. Keywords such as *appetitive motivation*, *aversive motivation*, *Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory*, *BAS*, *BIS*, and *approach–avoidance motivation* were used in different combinations. Studies published in English and accessible online were included, while unrelated or non-academic sources were excluded. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by full-text review of selected articles. Data regarding study objectives, population characteristics, variables, and major findings were extracted and synthesized qualitatively. The review primarily relied on peer-reviewed studies to reduce bias, and no statistical meta-analysis or quantitative effect measures were conducted.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review offers a general notion of available academic literature concerning the subject and forms the Behavioral Activation Systemise through which the current study is framed. It integrates both the empirical results, theoretical positions, and methodological strategies which have contributed to the present-day knowledge of this field. The following section will attempt to place the current study in its scientific context by dividing the work of researchers into international research and Indian research.

International researches

Beginning with the classical conditioning studies conducted by Pavlov (early 1900s), which provided the initial scientific Behavioral Activation System is in terms of the learning of the appetitive and aversive motives in the form of association. His results transformed the field of psychology since he demonstrated that motivational tendencies could be conditioned. Then, Thorndike (1911) gave the Law of Effect which directly establishes that approach behaviour is a result of reward and avoidance behaviour is the result of punishment, ideas which became modern motivational systems of appetitive and aversive behavior. Thereafter, the Field Theory proposed by Lewin (1935) was created to explain the interaction between the psychological forces in the environment and in the person to develop behaviour. His research was done to gain a better insight of how humans make decisions under social pressure and the emotional tension experienced by them. Employing Thorndike's work, Skinner's (1938, 1953) operant conditioning formed the principle of behaviour which would be used subsequently to understand the principle of appetitive and aversive motives. Additionally, Hull (1943) came up with Drive Reduction Theory as a scientific model of explaining why organisms engage in behaviours that lead to a decrease in biological tension. He used human infants and animals especially rats as his study subjects since they offered natural instances of primary needs including hunger and thirst. His work emphasized the underlying dynamic of approach and avoidance which formed the conceptual foundation of the theory subsequently extended by Gray. Gray (1970s–1991) constructed significant work on the Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST), which explains why individuals vary in their response to reward and punishment that grounds the theoretical foundation of contemporary studies in appetitive and aversive motivation. The theory of Gray was formulated to explain the way of how the organisms must navigate between the threats and the rewards, and it is one of the most detailed explanations of the existence of the differences in motivation.

Carver & White (1994) were the first to develop the Behavioral Inhibition System/ Behavioral Activation System Scale, which is a significant psychometric instrument. Those were variables that comprised three Behavioral Activation System subscales (Drive, Fun Seeking, Reward Responsiveness) and Behavioral Inhibition System fear/avoidance sensitivity. Further, the study by Berridge & Robinson (1998) on "wanting" vs "liking" perfected the knowledge on appetitive motives. The animal models (rats) were used as the population. Some of the variables were dopamine activity, reward cues and approach behavior. Conclusions made were between appetitive and hedonic pleasure that formed the contemporary theory of rewards. Torrubia et al. (2001) created the Sensitivity to Punishment and Sensitivity to Reward Questionnaire (SPSRQ), a preliminary conceptualization of appetitive and aversive motives. Spanish undergraduate students were not left out in the population. The two-factor structure was confirmed by results, and it supported the theory of Gray. Later, Gray & McNaughton (2000) revised Gray's Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory by redefining appetitive and aversive motives through the Behavioral Activation System and Behavioral Inhibition System. Variables included fear, anxiety, reward pursuit, conflict processing. Their findings established the modern motivational framework.

In the aspect of Neuroimaging studies (2000s), a seminal contribution was presented which redefined the appetitive and aversive motives by the Behavioral Inhibition System and Behavioral Activation System. Variables were fear, anxiety, reward seeking and conflict processing. Their results formed the contemporary motivational model. LeDoux's (2012) aimed on the neural processes of fear that directly give information to aversive motives. The findings indicated that amygdala plays the central role in aversive motivational processes

and this helps avoidance, withdrawal, and protection. The results of LeDoux form the Behavioral Activation System is of neurobiological aversive motives. Similarly, Massaccesi et al. (2020) aimed to understand neural and behavioral differences between approach-Behavioral Activation System appetitive motives and threat-avoidance motives by employing experimental tasks and imaging and confirmed neural differences between appetitive and aversive motivations.

Moreover, while Smillie et al. (2006–2007) indicated that Extraversion is very much associated with appetitive Behavioral Activation System sensitivity and Neuroticism is correlated with Behavioral Inhibition System Behavioral Activation System aversive sensitivity, Poythress et al. (2008) demonstrated that abnormal appetitive–aversive balance contributes to maladaptive behavior. Then, Berkman et al. (2009) revealed that appetitive motives that are affected by Behavioral Activation System tend to dominate inhibitory control and high Behavioral Inhibition System increase the formation of caution and slower reactions. Choi / Pessoa et al. (2014) further demonstrated that greater appetitive motivation enhanced competition through aversive control networks leading to accelerated approach responses but less accuracy and Benvenuti et al. (2017) investigated the role of approach and avoidance systems in the process of decoding emotion especially in the presence of positive and negative facial expressions and revealed differences between the behavioral inhibition system and behavioral activation system of people.

In early research conducted by Walker & Ehlers (2009), they revealed that exposure to alcohol during adolescence due to the appetitive motivational experience may affect adult ethanol consumption later. Then, Yoshikawa et al. (2013) examined the link of appetitive motives with a non-exercise lifestyle and found positive association between them under the condition of 'hunger'. Similarly, Mu et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between physical exercise and negative emotions among university students and observed that sleep quality and self-rated health partially mediated their relationship. The latest study conducted by Flack et al. (2023) aimed to shed light on the occurrence of appetitive and aversive rewarding and punishing motivational tendencies in the real-world decision-making. Their results revealed that those who had strong appetitive motive strength manifested more approach behaviors as compared to those who had stronger aversive motivation. Further, Bresin & Hunt (2025) conducted a meta-analysis to explore the link between the individual differences in terms of appetitive and aversive motivation and dysregulated behavior and the findings suggested that some dysregulated behaviors such as alcohol use, marijuana use, aggression, and gambling had a positive relation to appetitive motivation, whereas other dysregulated behaviors like binge eating and self-injury had a positive relation with aversive motivation.

Indian Researches

Ganesh et al., (2018) conducted one of the first Indian clinical studies with the Behavioral Inhibition System/Behavioral Activation System Scale to address the motivational tendencies of patients with substance-use disorders. Their investigation was aimed at comprehending motivational risk factors underlying addiction in India which proved the strong impact of appetitive/aversive motives on clinical behaviour. Corresponding to which Bhat et al., (2019) examined the impacts of Behavioral Inhibition System/Behavioral Activation System motivational systems on emotional regulation and behavioural inclinations of Indian youth, especially considering the escalating anxiety and impulsivity issues among the young populations. Their research confirmed the relevance of Behavioral Inhibition System/Behavioral Activation System systems in the Indian culture and the study

was carried out to provide responses to the gap in Indian motivational research and personality research.

CONCLUSION

The current systematic review combined theoretical and empirical evidence in the context of Gray Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory about the appetitive and aversive motives. The studies reviewed allow concluding that approach-oriented (appetitive) and avoidance-oriented (aversive) motivational systems are important to consider in determining behavior, emotion regulation, and decision-making. Although other researchers claim that there is gender difference in terms of reinforcement sensitivity, the results of these studies are not consistent and seem to be affected by sociocultural and developmental factors. The literature also points out that there are several behavioral consequences related to these motivational systems such as decision-making patterns and dysregulations. Although there is a lot of research in the international community, research on the Indian context is minimal. Thus, additional systematic studies are required to have a more in-depth insight into appetitive and aversive motivational processes in young adults in various cultural settings.

Limitations

- The results of this review only apply to adults. This is because the review focused on this age group. The findings may not be the same, for age groups.
- The review only used studies that were easily available online. This might have missed studies that were not published or done in certain areas. This could make the review not fully complete.

Future Implications

Subsequent studies ought to be implemented on the study of appetitive and aversive motives in different cultural settings especially among the Indian population where they are still scarcely researched. Research based on bigger and more heterogeneous samples would contribute to the enhancement of the generalizability of results. Longitudinal research designs can also give us more detailed information about the way motivation systems evolve with time and shape behavioral consequences, e.g. decision-making, emotional regulation, and risk-related behaviors. Also, combining neurobiological methods with psychological tests would help to further understand the mechanisms of appetitive and aversive motivation. This type of research might help in the establishment of more effective educational, counselling and mental health intervention among young adults.

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Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest among the authors.

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