

# ABUNDANCY MOTIVE

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## Abundance Motive

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychology, Behavioral Economics, Consumer Behavior

### 1. Core Definition and Theoretical Framework

The **Abundance Motive** is defined fundamentally as the psychological drive to acquire, achieve, or possess resources, opportunities, or experiences significantly exceeding the minimal threshold required for perceived safety, comfort, or basic satisfaction. Unlike basic needs or deficiency motivations (as outlined in frameworks such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), the abundance motive operates in the realm of surplus, pushing individuals toward optimization and maximization rather than mere sufficiency. This motive suggests that human satisfaction is often relative and dynamic; once basic needs are met, the psychological goal shifts from avoiding deprivation to achieving a substantial, often relative, advantage over a baseline or peer group.

This drive is crucial in understanding advanced human behavior, particularly in affluent societies where resource scarcity is not an immediate, daily threat for the majority. Psychologically, the motive is not merely a desire for status, although status is often a secondary benefit; it is an inherent cognitive tendency toward establishing reserves--be they financial, material, social capital, or even knowledge--that provide a robust buffer against potential future uncertainty. In behavioral economics, this motive helps explain why marginal utility often fails to diminish sufficiently to halt acquisition, especially when the item being acquired serves a symbolic or comparative function, transcending its practical utility.

The Abundance Motive stands in direct contrast to concepts of sufficiency or minimalist philosophies. Whereas sufficiency seeks "enough," the motive for abundance seeks "more than enough." This subtle but powerful distinction fuels competitive behavior, economic growth, and, paradoxically, significant psychological distress when the pursuit of endless accumulation becomes divorced from actual well-being. Researchers often analyze this motive through the lens of Goal Theory, characterizing it as a mastery-approach goal focused on reaching superior outcomes, rather than simply avoiding failure or meeting set standards.

### 2. Origins in Evolutionary and Behavioral Psychology

From an evolutionary perspective, the Abundance Motive likely served a highly adaptive function, ensuring survival during periods of unpredictable resource availability. Early human ancestors who exhibited a strong drive to acquire and store excess food, tools, or mating resources were statistically more likely to survive unexpected catastrophes, famines, or harsh winters, passing these advantageous hoarding and maximizing tendencies onto subsequent generations. This instinctual drive, rooted deeply in our neural architecture, prioritizes the accumulation of reserves, treating future scarcity as an ever-present, though often latent, threat.

In contemporary behavioral psychology, however, this ancient adaptive mechanism often becomes maladaptive in environments characterized by constant, easy access to resources. Modern industrial and consumer societies provide an endless stream of opportunities for acquisition, triggering the abundance motive without the natural limiting factors of historical scarcity. This misalignment between evolutionary wiring and modern environment is critical. For instance, the drive to consume calorie-dense foods--historically an effective strategy for storing energy--now contributes directly to public health crises such as obesity, illustrating the negative consequences when the drive for excess meets unlimited supply.

Furthermore, the motive is closely linked to concepts of relative social standing. The acquisition of resources above and beyond necessity often translates directly into social signaling and status--a non-material form of abundance that confers advantages such as increased influence and better mating opportunities. Therefore, the motive is frequently reinforced not just by the internal feeling of security provided by surplus, but by the external validation and hierarchical benefits derived from possessing more than one's peers. This social comparative element sustains the drive even when objective needs are comfortably satisfied.

### 3. Key Characteristics of Abundance-Driven Behavior

Behaviors driven by the Abundance Motive exhibit several distinguishing characteristics, primarily focused on maximization, comparative evaluation, and insatiability. The core characteristic is the relentless pursuit of non-essential increase, where the goal shifts from achieving a desired state (e.g., having a reliable car) to achieving the best possible state (e.g., having the most expensive or technologically advanced vehicle available). This leads to a constant upward movement of the aspirational baseline.

A second key characteristic is its reliance on social comparison. Unlike motivations rooted in personal mastery or intrinsic reward, the satisfaction derived from abundance is often heavily weighted by relative position. An individual motivated by abundance may feel dissatisfied with a high level of income if they perceive their peer group or reference population earning significantly more. This constant, often subconscious, benchmarking against others ensures that the motive is perpetually activated, as social hierarchies inherently dictate that only a few can occupy the highest rung of material or experiential abundance at any given time.

Finally, **insatiability** is perhaps the most defining characteristic. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the Hedonic Treadmill or hedonic adaptation, where newly acquired goods or achieved status provide only a temporary boost in satisfaction before the individual adapts to the new baseline and requires yet another acquisition to feel the same level of fulfillment. This cyclical requirement for escalating resource acquisition prevents long-term contentment and keeps the individual perpetually seeking the next layer of surplus.

## 4. The Role of Abundancy in Consumerism and Material Acquisition

The Abundancy Motive is the engine driving modern consumer economies. Businesses and marketers skillfully leverage this psychological drive by framing products not merely as solutions to problems, but as essential components for achieving superior status or preventing perceived future inadequacy. Advertising often portrays the abundant life as the only truly successful life, equating happiness and security directly with the possession of surplus material goods and experiences.

In the context of material acquisition, the motive manifests strongly in large-scale purchasing patterns--the replacement of functional items with newer, marginally improved versions (known as planned obsolescence), or the acquisition of multiple items where one would suffice (e.g., extensive wardrobes, collections, or multiple residences). The drive is often less about the functional use of the item and more about the symbolic capital it represents. The accumulation of luxury goods, for instance, serves as a clear, visible signal of abundant resources, solidifying social standing.

Furthermore, the motive extends beyond physical possessions into experiential consumption. The demand for increasingly elaborate, unique, or exclusive experiences (such as extravagant travel or high-end dining) reflects a desire to accumulate abundant memories and unique social currency. In the digital age, this translates into the accumulation of digital content, followers, or metrics--a form of virtual resource hoarding intended to maximize perceived influence and reach, even if the actual utility of this digital surplus is negligible to daily functioning.

## 5. Pathological Manifestations: The Link to Overconsumption and Addiction

When the Abundancy Motive operates unchecked, it can lead to significant pathological outcomes, moving beyond typical consumer behavior into areas of addiction, mental health issues, and profound resource misallocation. The source content explicitly links the motive to psychological dependency on food, which contributes to health problems and obesity. This occurs because the basic evolutionary drive to consume in abundance becomes detached from actual caloric necessity, leading to chronic overeating driven by psychological rather than metabolic demands.

Other manifestations include clinical hoarding disorder, where the drive for material security through acquisition becomes incapacitating. Hoarding represents the extreme fulfillment of the abundancy motive, where the individual cannot discard surplus items due to an irrational fear of potential future need, despite the immediate detrimental impact on their living environment and quality of life. This demonstrates a cognitive failure to distinguish between beneficial reserves and harmful clutter.

The motive also contributes significantly to debt and financial instability. Individuals driven by the pursuit of surplus may overextend their financial means to maintain a lifestyle of perceived

abundance, resulting in chronic stress and economic vulnerability. In a broader sense, the collective weight of unchecked abundance motives contributes heavily to unsustainable environmental practices, as the constant demand for maximizing consumption places immense pressure on natural resources and waste management systems globally.

## 6. Measuring and Moderating the Abundance Motive

Psychologists and behavioral scientists attempt to measure the strength of the Abundance Motive through various means, including self-report questionnaires assessing materialistic values, future orientation, and susceptibility to social comparison. Behavioral studies often use experimental designs where participants are offered choices between fulfilling immediate needs versus accumulating non-essential surpluses, thereby quantifying the propensity for maximizing outcomes even at a cost.

Moderating the negative aspects of this powerful drive often involves cognitive restructuring techniques aimed at increasing self-awareness regarding true needs versus manufactured desires. Key strategies include practicing **gratitude**, which helps reset the hedonic baseline by emphasizing current positive possessions rather than focusing on future deficiencies. Furthermore, fostering intrinsic motivations--pursuits that are rewarding in themselves, such as community service or skill development--can help shift the psychological focus away from external, material accumulation toward internal, spiritual, or relational abundance.

Societal moderation often requires structural changes, such as policies that de-emphasize consumption as the primary measure of success, and educational frameworks that promote financial literacy and mindfulness regarding consumption habits. Ultimately, shifting behavior requires acknowledging that the drive for more is deeply ingrained, but that its modern expression often requires conscious counteraction to promote sustainable well-being rather than perpetual striving.

## 7. Criticisms and Ethical Implications

A primary criticism leveled against the widespread acceptance of the Abundance Motive as a desirable trait is its inherent conflict with principles of global equity and environmental sustainability. When large segments of the global population are driven to maximize their surplus, it invariably puts massive strain on finite resources, leading to ecological degradation and accelerated climate change. Ethically, the pursuit of radical abundance by some necessitates resource deprivation or exploitation elsewhere in the system.

Furthermore, critics argue that excessive focus on the Abundance Motive detracts from psychological well-being. Empirical studies frequently show that while income and possessions increase happiness up to the point of meeting basic needs (addressing deficiency motives), further

increases derived from the abundance motive yield diminishing, and often negative, returns. The stress associated with maintaining, securing, and managing excessive surplus often outweighs the marginal increase in perceived satisfaction, leading to a state of affluent dissatisfaction.

Philosophically, the motive challenges ethical frameworks that prioritize communal welfare or intrinsic human value over material gain. Philosophies ranging from ancient Stoicism to modern post-materialism suggest that true human flourishing requires overcoming the endless cycle of desire inherent in the abundance drive. Understanding and mitigating the motive is therefore not just a matter of individual psychology, but a critical societal challenge requiring a fundamental reevaluation of what constitutes success and security in an increasingly resource-constrained world.

### Further Reading

[Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Hedonic Treadmill \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Consumerism and Behavioral Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychology Dictionary Entry on Abundance Motive](#)