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Beyond Utility: Identity Economies as Psychological Systems of Motivation

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Abstract

Classical and contemporary psychological theories of motivation have long sought to explain why individuals pursue particular goals, persist in specific behaviours, and make choices that frequently diverge from material self-interest. While behavioural economics, social psychology, and identity-based approaches have demonstrated that human action cannot be reduced to the pursuit of utility alone, the mechanisms through which identity shapes motivation remain incompletely theorised. This paper introduces the concept of *identity economies* as a framework for understanding motivation as a process of allocating scarce resources within and across identity groups.

Drawing on Identity Group Theory (IGT), the paper argues that individuals participate simultaneously in multiple identity groups that provide access to both material and non-material resources. These resources include not only economic rewards but also recognition, belonging, legitimacy, status, reciprocity, esteem, and psychological affirmation. Identity groups function as systems of allocation and regulation that distribute such resources according to group-specific norms, values, and expectations. Human behaviour is therefore understood not simply as the maximisation of utility but as the pursuit, protection, and conversion of identity resources within competing identity economies.

The paper synthesises insights from behavioural economics, social identity theory, identity theory, self-determination theory, and research on social recognition to develop a psychological account of identity-based motivation. Particular attention is given to the role of identity salience, identity investment, identity loss, and identity conflict in shaping decision-making and behavioural persistence. The framework helps explain why individuals frequently sacrifice material welfare for status, group belonging, moral commitments, ideological causes, or symbolic recognition.

Rather than replacing existing motivational theories, identity economies are proposed as a complementary framework that integrates psychological, social, and institutional dimensions of motivation. The paper concludes by outlining a research agenda and a series of empirically



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testable propositions concerning the relationship between identity resources, motivational processes, and behavioural outcomes. In doing so, it offers a novel approach to understanding human motivation beyond conventional models of utility maximisation.

Keywords: Identity Group Theory (IGT); Identity Economies; Motivation; Social Identity; Identity-Based Motivation; Recognition; Belonging; Status; Identity Salience; Behavioural Decision-Making; Self-Determination; Psychological Resources; Social Psychology; Behavioural Economics; Identity Conflict