

Consumer Purpose: A Holistic Rethinking of Psychological Bonds

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Abstract:

This conceptual paper integrates needs, goals, and value/image congruence theories to propose an inclusive concept of consumer psychological engagement with companies and their brands or products. To maximize service experiences and marketing messages and ensure sustainable success, marketers and innovators must collect holistic intelligence on consumers' needs, goals, values, and self-image to strengthen consumers' psychological bonds with firms and their brands.

Keyword: congruence | goals | needs | purpose | psychological bonds

Article:

Purpose of the study

This conceptual paper posits a need for organizations to approach relationship marketing and service design by addressing the fullest possible complement of underlying psychological purposes that consumers intend to achieve through their alliances with a firm (and its brands and products). While purpose is generally defined as “something set up to be an object or end to be attained” (Purpose, Citation2019), the current treatment of the term defines consumer purpose as “the reason a consumer contracts or transacts with the firm to use its services or buy its products.” The paper responds to three forces driving organizations to examine their strategic thinking on consumer relationships: the need for theoretically sound concepts guiding work on consumer bonding, the need to incorporate a better understanding of consumer purpose into service innovation, and the desire to be more holistic in defining consumer psychological engagement with the firm and the brand.

Firstly, consumer bonding has been an ongoing subject of interest in the literature. Arantola (Citation2002) initiated a theoretical discussion of consumer bonding which he deemed necessary to underpin the practice of consumer relationship marketing. The present paper further advances the understanding of consumer psychological bonds, interpreting these as a direct outcome of firms strategically fulfilling consumer purposes. Given that growing ranks of millennial customers value meaningful and personalized experiences (Fromm & Garton, Citation2013), firms can initiate and

strengthen relationships by paying more attention to the language of needs, solutions, goals, values, and image congruity.

Secondly, from the industry vantage point, differentiation through strategic service design and innovation is an organization's widespread growth and expansion strategy. However, nearly thirty percent of new service businesses fail (Storey & Kelly, Citation2001) because of their inability to innovate and to uncover consumers' unacknowledged needs (Weigel & Goffin, Citation2015). Scholars who proposed Jobs-To-Be-Done Theory (JTBD) suggested that customers "hire" a product or service to do the job for them and questioned traditional customer segmentation for innovation, emphasizing fulfilling consumer needs and desires at multiple levels (Christensen et al., Citation2016).

Lastly, the perspective offered in this paper is a natural extension of service-dominant logic, which addresses that service is a fundamental basis of market exchange. Firms can benefit from long-term marketing relationships by focusing on customer experience and value co-creation with customers (Lusch & Vargo, Citation2014). Richardson (Citation2010) described the customer experience as a holistic impression of how customers engage with companies, brands, and products but also pointed out that companies have limited control due to variations in psychological engagement and uncertainty levels across customers. In the services context, where intangible attributes are already dominant, symbolic interpretations of firm/consumer alliances (such as consumer purpose) become important cues to prompt consumers' purchase decisions (Sirgy et al., Citation2000). Firms can help their customers find solutions to problems and achieve more abstract goals tied to strong emotions.

This work adds to the evolving literature on consumer bonding and psychological engagement by proposing a conceptual framework emphasizing shared purpose between companies and customers. The paper ties together need theory, goal theory, and value and self-image congruence theories to more clearly characterize the components of psychological engagement of customers with firms and their brands and products. The proposed framework is designed to serve the needs of active marketers by identifying "relational touch-points between brands and consumers that are meaningful to encourage consumer identification ... and that provide a context that boosts consumer interaction and sharing with each other and with the brand" (Gambetti & Schultz, Citation2015, p. 2). It also seeks to be comprehensive enough to encompass isolated theoretical findings that might be overlooked in a world of "too much information," e.g., nostalgic bonding (Holbrook & Schindler, Citation2003); brand bonding through company history/factory familiarization trips for consumers (Mitchell & Orwig, Citation2002); and bonding via self-service designs (Huettinger & Cubrinskas, Citation2011). The following section draws upon extant research to develop a fuller picture of purpose-driven consumerism.

Synthesis of theories

A psychological bond can strengthen buyer-seller relationships by making a firm stand out amongst its competitors and generate positive consumer emotion (Arantola, Citation2002). Such bonds are connected to consumers' values and preferences (Liljander & Strandvik, Citation1995). In this paper, consumer bonds are theoretically linked to consumer purpose, establishing that firms and brands can strategically form and strengthen positive psychological bonds with consumers by fulfilling consumer purposes. Multiple theories in consumer studies are tapped to provide a holistic definition of consumer purpose: needs theory, task-focused jobs-to-be-done theory, goal theory, and congruence theory (value and self-concept congruence). The hope is that firms and consumers

will bond better when both the firm and the consumer recognize the firm's role in fulfilling consumers' underlying purposes, including their needs, tasks, goals, and desires, for congruence with consumer values and self-concepts. Furthermore, beliefs about a firm's capacity to fulfill needs, tasks, goals, values, and self-concepts should motivate consumers to choose one brand offer over another.

Needs fulfillment theory and jobs-to-be-done

Needs fulfillment theory helps articulate potential psychological benefits that accrue to consumers selecting and using a firm's services to achieve a purpose, i.e., additional benefits not directly generated by other service marketing segmentation factors such as demography or geography. To this point, we review the hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs postulates that humans have a natural hierarchy of needs, ranging from physiological needs like hunger and thirst at the bottom to psychological needs such as belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization at the top. The theory highlights the importance of fulfilling these needs, with self-actualization representing the desire to reach one's full potential.

Needs are consumers' expectations that derive from individual circumstances or problems that consumers must solve. Needs provide motivation for behavior. Unmet needs motivate the individual, and Maslow viewed this process as never-ending (Maslow, Citation1970). Even as one meets an existing need, new needs will arise, as individuals can only partially satisfy them. This suggests a boundless potential for binding a brand or product to consumers' needs. As such, marketers must tie their messaging back to solutions being achieved when consumers opt into a company's service mix (Roy, Citation2005). A more recent theory, jobs-to-be-done (Anthony & Sinfield, Citation2007; Bitetti & Gibbert, Citation2020; Christensen et al., Citation2016; Oestreicher, Citation2011), expressly seeks to harness the demand inherent in consumers' everyday or work-related decisions involving task obligations and performances, either by providing innovative solutions to problems that previously have gone unaddressed in the marketplace or by refining existing products to achieve tasks more efficiently or effectively.

Maslow's needs theory states that people have both basic and advanced needs, and individuals will pursue higher needs only after fulfilling lower ones (Maslow, Citation1943). While the bottom four needs could be satisfied to the point where they no longer motivate behavior, self-actualization, the highest need, is insatiable and will always leave individuals with unfulfilled aspirations (Lea et al., Citation1987). This is an essential point since many of the current marketing mix elements (e.g., physical evidence and tangible aspects of product and place) tend to be tied to more immediate, lower-order needs rather than directly connecting with consumers' higher-order hopes and dreams. In order to stand out in the competitive market and motivate purchases, organizations should directly appeal to the higher levels of need (Powell, Citation2015).

Additionally, Gordon (Citation1998) suggested that fulfilling needs strengthens relationships. When a business identifies and satisfies higher-level consumer psychological needs, strong bonds can develop through strategic consumer/firm encounters surpassing traditional membership or communication tactics. Powell mentioned in his article, "Powell, Citation2015: Maslow's hierarchy of needs has modern-day applications," that Starbucks is successful not by selling its coffee to quench thirst but by selling a "gathering place." He also points out, "If you are selling diapers, are you selling parents a product that meets their baby's physiological need? Or are you selling them on the idea that your diaper brand shows their baby how much they love and care for him?" (Powell, Citation2015). Focusing on a higher psychological need can stimulate

motivated consumers to achieve self-fulfillment. Yalch and Brunel's (Citation1996) study found that consumers were willing to pay 30% more and 22% more for an aesthetic shaver and a toothbrush that appealed more to the concept of self-actualization than to functional equivalents. Together, these findings imply significant benefits of appealing directly to the higher-order needs of consumers through the company's marketing and service innovation.

Goal theory

While recognizing human needs, Maslow's hierarchy has been challenged by scholars who argue that the order of needs may not be rigid for everyone. Different individuals may prioritize their needs differently, and cultural differences also play a role in the applicability of Maslow's model (Frame, Citation1996). Ford's motivational systems theory (Citation1992, 1995) complements Maslow's model and suggests that motivation is driven by the interaction of goal-setting, self-efficacy, and emotions, which may better capture Maslow's higher-level needs. Ford's theory suggests we are motivated by goals, which refer to where we are heading, what we are trying to do, and how we get turned on or off (Ford, Citation1992). Becker et al. (Citation2020) proposed that customer experience research needs to shift from a firm-centric perspective to a customer-centric approach that prioritizes a goal-oriented perspective of customer journeys. This paper argues that companies can leverage this by messaging their strategies to help consumers achieve their goals.

Consumer goals are "abstract benefits sought by the consumer that are available through the (abstract or concrete) features of a product class" (Huffman & Houston, Citation1993, p. 194). In goal-directed behavior, an individual's active pursuit of a goal (or not) is linked to the possibility of positive or negative results (Perugini & Bagozzi, Citation2001; Rawsthorne & Elliot, Citation2016). Anticipated emotions can motivate consumers to seek experiences leading to goal attainment (Bagozzi & Pieters, Citation1998; Perugini & Bagozzi, Citation2001). Goal-congruent situations produce positive emotions, while goal-incongruent situations produce negative emotions (Hosany, Citation2012). According to Van Osselaer and Janiszewski (Citation2012), product evaluation and choice are linked to goals and attributes. A brand that can only partially fulfill the consumer's goal must consider providing alternative or compensatory benefits.

Supporting consumer goal attainment is a logical tactic for building consumer psychological bonds. Previous research suggests that consumers with specific goals are more motivated and satisfied with their purchases (Bagozzi & Dholakia, Citation1999). For example, consumers seeking recognition and status purchase higher-end luxury goods (MacInnis & Chun, Citation2006). The attainment of goals by consuming well-matched services creates gratitude and delight (Perugini & Bagozzi, Citation2001), predicting satisfaction, word of mouth, and repurchase intention (Garbarino & Johnson, Citation2001; Johnson et al., Citation2006; MacInnis & Chun, Citation2006; Soscia, Citation2007). This presents opportunities for firms to develop services and products that directly align with consumer goal attainment.

Congruence theory

Two avenues of congruence theory are critical in advancing our conceptualization of customers' underlying purpose: values congruence and self-image congruity.

Values congruence

Consumers and firms can share values (Bartosik-Purgat, Citation2008) and general beliefs about desirable behaviors or end states that feed into a person's self-perception (Locke, Citation1976; Rokeach, Citation1973). In this context, congruence has been defined as a mental comparison that consumers make concerning the similarity or dissimilarity of an organization's stated values and their own set of values (Johar & Sirgy, Citation1991), suggesting that people buy products or favor a brand to support their expression of values (Aaker, Citation1999; Sirgy & Danes, Citation1982; W. Huang, Citation2022). More recent research on the political ideology of consumers and concomitant brand attachment underscores the importance of values-based consumerism (Chan & Ilicic, Citation2019; Jung & Mittal, Citation2019).

"VALS" and "List of Values" are common values-driven marketing devices that identify consumer values to influence behaviors and create a sense of fit between consumers and firms (Kahle & Kennedy, Citation1988). For example, the List of Values comprises the following nine values: Self-Respect, Sense of Accomplishment, Being Well Respected, Security, Warm Relationships with Others, Sense of Belonging, Fun and Enjoyment in Life, Self-Fulfillment, and Excitement (Kahle & Kennedy, Citation1988). Nike's "Just Do It" campaign is an excellent example of sharing the value of a "sense of accomplishment" that is both universally relatable and individually meaningful to consumers (Katz, Citation1994).

Another area of values-based marketing stresses authentic linkages between a firm and the broader societal issues important to consumers. To be genuine in the customer's mind, an organization's statement of values will need to be validated with standard measures of social and environmental impact, such as independent or third-party certifications (Peiro-Signes et al., Citation2014; Walker & Johnson, Citation2009). Values-based consumption is exercised when consumers use their spending power to reward socially desirable actions by brands or firms (Ajzen, Citation1991). Ajzen (Citation1991) suggests that the deployment of consumer power is directly influenced by consumers' subjective norms and perceived control over their behavioral decisions.

Evidence shows that sharing values with a firm influences consumers' purchasing behaviors (Cazier et al., Citation2007, Citation2017; Sabbir & Nazrul, Citation2014). Companies such as Body Shop and Method that have successfully marketed their commitment to environmental stewardship have significantly increased sales (Ryan, Citation2012; Sillanpaa, Citation1998). Researchers have confirmed the association between values congruence and other consumer outcomes, including increasing customer satisfaction, trust, and affective commitment to the company, thus, indirectly leading to customer loyalty (Cazier et al., Citation2007; Zhang & Bloemer, Citation2008, Citation2011). Nonetheless, Edelman (Citation2013) found that only 10% of consumers believed that brands conduct business in ways that match customers' values. This gap in corporate performance opens the door for a much more concerted effort on the part of firms to communicate mutual interest in values-driven behavior and further justifies the inclusion of values congruence in the service/product innovation design process.

Self-image congruity

Rogers (Citation1951) self-theory postulated that an individual's behavior is directed toward protecting and enhancing his or her self-concept. Thus, people want to feel, experience, and behave in ways consistent with their self-image (imagined or projected). The more consistent or congruent people feel in life situations, the higher their sense of self-worth. Extant research has proposed that

consumers are attracted to products with a symbolic image (Kwak & Kang, Citation2009) or brands that fit their consumers' personality traits (Aaker, Citation1999). Furthermore, belonging to a brand fan base can shape a consumer's identity, especially in idolizing a human brand, such as a musician or political figure, leading fans to mimic the idol's dress and behaviors (Y. -A. Huang et al., Citation2015).

Consumer self-image is built upon descriptions of personality attributes or traits (e.g., Litvin et al., Citation2001, p. 41). An identical process describes the perceived personalities of products, brands, and suppliers (Manhas & Tukamushaba, Citation2015; Parker, Citation2009). Brand personality is defined as a set of human like qualities consumers associate with a brand (Aaker, Citation1997). Although no consensus exists on what traits are most important in consumer behavior, formal research on self-image congruity between the consumer and organizations has been mainly based on Aaker's (Citation1997) Brand Personality Index, which contained 42 personality traits loaded on five dimensions: Excitement, Sincerity, Sophistication, Competence, and Ruggedness (Su & Reynolds, Citation2017).

However, looser interpretations of personality types have emerged in the popular press. These generally describe a brand succinctly with an evocative one-word label (Magrath, Citation2001). High congruity will result when consumers perceive that a firm's (or brand's) image matches their sense of self (Johar & Sirgy, Citation1991). Brand images said to have produced a following among consumers include Microsoft and Rolex as rulers; Apple and Harley-Davidson as outlaws; Levi Strauss and North Face as explorers; and Nike and March of Dimes as heroes (Magrath, Citation2001).

Firms' ability to identify and articulate their brand personality type can give them a competitive advantage (Aaker, Citation1999; Dibley & Baker, Citation2001; Reed, Citation2002). Strategically, a firm that understands the self-image characteristics that matter to its customers can position itself as an appealing brand personality using symbolic tactics of names, slogans, logos, images, music, and longer narrative stories (Sung & Kim, Citation2010). In addition, brand images can be supported through judicious framing of related consumer values, goals, and needs. Such tactics create a link between a firm and the consumer's self-image, and the link will influence the consumer's attitude and behavior toward the company (Escalas, Citation2004).

Literature has shown that pursuing image congruence is helpful in achieving customers' underlying purposes. Fournier (Citation1998) stated that strong image congruence is associated with "the cultivation of protective feelings of uniqueness and dependency and encouragement of tolerance in the face of adverse circumstance" (p. 364). McEwen (Citation2005) also suggested that consumers tend to create strong relations with brands that can express and enhance their consumers' identities. In addition, when satisfied with the service, customers report higher self-image congruity to become brand loyal (Back, Citation2016; Kandampully & Suhartanto, Citation2003; Wilkins et al., Citation2006). Angle and Forehand (Citation2016) demonstrated that threats to a consumer's self-brand association are also motivational. When brands questioned customers' recent inactivity compared to other customers, some consumers increased transaction activity to reinforce their perceived self-association with the brand. "Willingness to pay" research shows greater purchase intent for products that protect or enhance consumer self-images (Graeff, Citation1996; Sirgy & Danes, Citation1982).

Figure 1 visually presents the synthesis of needs/task-motivated, goal, and congruence theories used in conceptualizing customers' underlying purposes for using a firm.

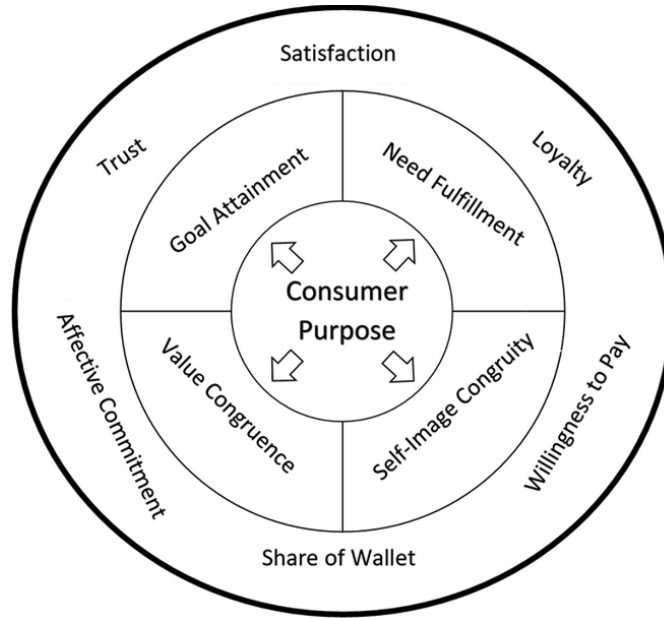


Figure 1. Theoretical linkages between consumer purpose and behaviors.

Conclusions and future studies

Drawing upon needs fulfillment theory, goal theory, and congruence theory, this paper proposed a conceptual model to emphasize how organizations can benefit by uncovering consumers' underlying purposes. Figure 2 presents the theoretical framework of formulated propositions for future research. This paper advances knowledge in marketing by introducing consumer purpose as an integrated psychological construct that is both company- and customer-centric. We argue that to develop relevant service experiences and market messaging touch points, market researchers need to collect holistic intelligence on consumers' needs, goals, values, and self-images and then examine the firm's capacity to assist consumers in fulfilling these psychological needs outcomes. A firm must review proposed service experiences in terms of their ability to promote relevance and match customers' psychological motivations at deeper levels. Implementing market communications that appeal to consumers' higher psychological expectations, i.e., purpose enables firms to distinguish their services and brands in ways that can reduce dependence on easily copied core technologies.

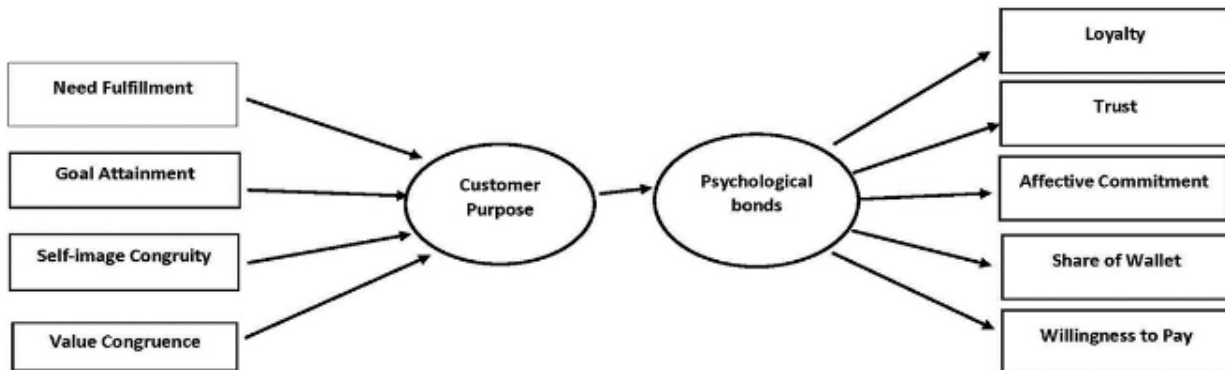


Figure 2. Proposed theoretical consumer purpose and behavior model.

Theoretical contributions

The conceptual framework proposed by this paper expands research on customer relationships by moving the marketing field beyond the quality and value perspectives. We add richer detail on why customers bond with companies and clarify how the concept of consumer purpose can serve to integrate a wealth of literature in a meaningful and efficient way. The paper strives to present a coherent rationale for aggregating previously studied factors (goals, needs, values, and image/identities) into a holistic higher-order construct that potentially influences important consumer and organizational outcomes. Our framework reinforces the importance of psychological congruency for creating enduring psychological bonds between consumers and service providers. It offers a novel direction for ongoing research on customer/firm relationships and target marketing or differentiation strategies.

Extant literature has well-documented positive outcomes when needs are met, and goals are achieved, including willingness to pay, the share of the wallet, affective commitment, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Future studies can develop a holistic psychological bond scale based on the constructs proposed in this paper and empirically test its relationships with these outcomes. The following propositions serve to exemplify potential theoretical uses of the construct:

Proposition 1: Business firms apply concepts of consumer purpose to increase psychological bonds between consumers and firms, which will positively affect customer loyalty.

Proposition 2: Business firms apply concepts of consumer purpose to increase psychological bonds between consumers and firms, which will positively affect consumer trust.

Proposition 3: Business firms apply concepts of consumer purpose to increase psychological bonds between consumers and firms, which will positively affect customer affective commitment.

Proposition 4: Business firms apply concepts of consumer purpose to increase psychological bonds between consumers and firms, which will positively affect customer willingness to pay.

Proposition 5: Business firms apply concepts of consumer purpose to increase psychological bonds between consumers and firms, which will positively affect the firm's share of the wallet.

Practical implications

Marketers should be involved in communicating and offering relevant purpose-based services to attract customers (Cvelbar et al., Citation2017). On a practical level, firms can plan services by assessing their customers' needs, goals, values, and self-image conceptualizations during initial focus groups or market surveys. In addition, firms can sponsor consumer/provider co-creation activities to create additional consumer buy-in and further enhance mutual relationships. The objective is to formulate a product, brand image, or organizational identity that engages consumers deeper by demonstrating an in-depth understanding of customers' psychological motivation (Kotler et al., Citation2008).

To fulfill needs, firms must compare consumer requirements at multiple levels of the hierarchy with the firm's capacity to determine which "purposes" might best be served. Following

information on actual service performance can be communicated to consumers to show that the firm has visible competency in serving its customers' needs. In order to identify goals that the firm can facilitate, organizations should elicit data on how their services help customers do, be, or feel. Again, specific results related to consumer goal achievement should be communicated regularly to customers. Value congruence measurement requires firms to document consumer desire for value-based organizational activities and compare these to perceived or actual firms' support of or compliance with these activities. Lastly, self-image congruity assessment requires asking consumers to describe themselves as individuals and a firm's or brand's personality using common traits or attributes. Positive or emotionally motivating matches can be used in marketing communications to represent firm/consumer solidarity. To aid the definition and implementation of consumer purpose in marketing strategy, firms can consider investing in applications or use of big data filtering agents to gather and analyze more qualitative consumer data and offer more psychologically relevant services to consumers (Buhalis & Law, Citation2008; Linden et al., Citation2003; Xiang et al., Citation2015). At the same time, firms must respect and safeguard customer privacy, secure sensitive data, and honor customer preferences (O'Connor, Citation2007).

Disclosure statement

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