The Psychoeconomics of Clickbait: What we do when we swipe up

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ABSTRACT

In recent years due to increased globalisation and social media usage, new perspectives have emerged in behavioral science to explore the psychological principles behind consumer interaction with products and brands. As brands have moved from utilitarian and aspirational messaging to more social and emotional messaging, consumers have also become more aware of social causes and seek to make purchases and support brands which they relate to. This has also led to corresponding research in psycheconomics, to look into this phenomenon. This paper, drawing insight from secondary research, case studies and seminal work in behavioral psychology explores the changing dynamics of consumer engagement and behaviour in relation to brands, tracing how there is a clear progression to prefer brands which are able to effectively communicate with individual and social identities. Drawing upon these insights, this paper then highlights future areas for research in the field and suggests the adoption of interdisciplinary approaches.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of increased internet usage, e-commerce, targeted advertising and social media, the psycho-economics of why consumers engage with certain brands or 'swipe up', has increased relevance and a varied number of reasons. Consumer brand engagement depends on various factors like brand love, brand attachment and brand involvement. Brand involvement includes cognitive, affective, emotional and motivational dimensions as it triggers something in a person's brain that makes them behave in a particular way (Razmus, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, research has evolved from measuring consumer brand engagement to also evaluating the context in which the consumer is placed, cultural factors, socio-economic circumstances, and other holistic factors (Razmus, 2021). Research has also showed that brand engagement depend on loyalty intention as well, which occurs when a consumer says something positive about a brand and spreads the message via word of mouth, videos and other forms of content (Razmus, 2021).Thus, there is a positive correlation between consumer brand engagement and loyalty intention. Brand engagement is also conceptualised through the lens of social exchange theory, as opposed to economic exchange. While social trade involves both tangible and intangible rewards (knowledge, the pleasures of human contact, and social acceptability), economic exchange is centered on tangible items (Razmus, 2021).

Social media has facilitated the increase of brand engagement because consumers have no choice but to view ads on most platforms, which are uniquely targeted and tailored towards their preferences and psychological profile. Social media, technology and increased accessibility underscores and has created a large change in the landscape of consumer, since consumers are now not in favour of 'brand spam' and sponsorships which they do not relate to, and social media algorithms no longer favour these strategies either (Douglas, 2016). Social media transcends borders and links communities with each other and makes it much easier for brands to engage with consumers directly worldwide. If a product is popular on social media, more people worldwide are more likely to buy it. Brands can also cater to the expectations of many subcultures and innovations are happening in this field. These subcultures have been democratised and enlarged through social media. One may enter any subculture with a few clicks, and members' intense interactions cross over between the web, real-world settings, and traditional media with ease. Together, members are advancing novel concepts, things, methods, and aesthetics—bypassing gatekeepers of mass culture. Cultural innovators and their early adopter markets have merged with the growth of crowdculture (Douglas, 2016).

This paper will explore the theory behind consumer psychology and purchase behaviour, how social media and the internet have challenged previously held notions in behavioural psychology, and pose areas for future research in the field.

BACKGROUND

There are certain primary applications of the study of consumer behaviour from the lens of behavioural science, albeit being fundamentally irrational and influenced by a variety of factors. It involves the study of how consumers use these products and how likely they are to be influenced by branding and other practices. These applications are, marketing strategy, social marketing and studying consumer behavior (Lars, n.d). Brands use marketing strategy in order to make better marketing campaigns and understand what catches the consumers attention and which advertisement would actually make them more likely to buy a product from their brand. It is important to focus on financing and consumer satisfaction in the initial stages after launching a product (Lars, n.d). The second application is social marketing, which involves getting thoughts and ideas across to consumers rather than selling a product to them, which creates an emotional or social attachment to the brand. Finally, studying consumer behavior enables consumers to be aware of all the strategies and marketing campaigns that a company may use to spark an interest in purchasing a product from them – which in turn makes them better and more informed consumers (Lars, n.d).

Societal culture globally is increasing and more than ever before, driven by consumption habits, providing an insight into social attitudes. Brands have moved to focusing on aspects of self-actualisation of a potential consumer, and helping a person realize their true potential rather than just satisfying a person's basic needs. Understanding not only consumers' preferences but their socio-economic and cultural motivations, is of utmost importance to a brand's survival. People generally tend to fall in love with a brand when they associate themselves with the very image of the brand (Unbabel, 2019). With increasing awareness and desire to contribute to sustainable social causes, brands must also resonate with the consumer's place in society, their sense of self, and their motivations, wants and desires. This changing dimension of consumer behaviour has led to new forms of research, such as neuromarketing, which involved sticking electrodes in human brains to understand why we buy the things that we buy. The researcher Martin Lindstrom, the pioneer of neuromarketing, measured peoples neural activities by attacking them to a 32 ton fMRI , which measures how much oxygenated blood is running through a specific area of the brain. According to Lindstrom's research, humans are not rational consumers as it has been proven that 90 percent of our buying behavior is unconscious (Unbabel, 2019).

Research around consumer preferences, has progressed from being about a utilitarian understanding of consumers weighing cost and benefit (Unbabel, 2019), to understanding that the decisions of consumers as an emotional connection with the brand, a way to form individual and social identity (Bynder Marketing Team, 2023). Brand experience as a concept was first observed in the 1980s, where brands decided to focus on giving their customers experiences that would remain with them throughout their lives rather than just being a product. Research then indicated that the more a consumer knows about a brand and its practices, the more likely they are to buy a product from that brand (Bynder Marketing Team, 2023; Unbabel, 2019). It is based on the ideology that knowledge of the brand facilitates the association of themselves with the brand. The appearance and personality of the product and the brand also have a major influence on a consumer's perception of a brand and shape the way in which they think. Self-congruity refers to the degree of congruence between the image of a consumer and the image of a product. The more the degree of congruity, the more likely the consumer is to purchase the product (Bynder Marketing Team, 2023; Unbabel, 2019).

In fact, a study of 1400 advertising campaigns over the last three decades found that ads with purely emotional messaging performed twice as well as those that were more rational and practically minded (31% vs. 16%) (Bynder Marketing Team, 2023). Expanding on this topic, the following section of this paper will further explore the concept of experiential branding as an important method for brands to increase engagement in the age of social media and increased cultural interconnectivity.

DISCUSSION

Increased access to the internet has led to an e-commerce boom, and crowdsourcing of information on products which influences younger consumers constantly - young people are the main users of the internet and this is the place where brands get into contact with young audiences as 94% of all young people use the internet. (Magdalena, 2012). Research has found that brands mostly use social media marketing to cater young people who are usually between 15-24 years of age. The first type are the young enthusiasts of consumption who are usually girls from the middle class ,preferring economical brands. The second type is young connoisseurs of consumption who are usually boys in high school from

well to do families. They usually have quite a bit of money to spend so they do not go to shopping malls and instead prefer to buy from more exclusive brands and tend to stick to the same brand throughout their lives. The third type are young beneficiaries of consumption who are boys and girls from upper class families. They have a lot of money to spend and do not want to go to shopping malls. They are the ones who are subject to the advertising of expensive and lucrative brands. Younger generations understand their needs and desires, their budget, their rights and the marketing strategies that are employed by various brands (Magdelena, 2012).

A study conducted in 2016 showed that customers prefer brands which can create experiences, rather than functional attributes, with brand experiences including the subjective, internal and behavioural responses evoked by consumers interacting with the brand (Ebrahim et al, 2016). This important change makes the conventional methods of measuring consumer behaviour and engagement only correct on an algorithmic level and these methods to not incorporate the emotional responses that people feel and completely neglect the first impressions of people about certain products. This is an important area for future research in the field to be more holistic and attune to the current trends in engagement (Ebrahim et al, 2016).

With increasing awareness, and social media, more consumers want brands to connect with them and beyond the products or services themselves, want to connect with the people behind the brands and know what makes a brand unique (Sprout Social, 2018). Brands must recognise these characteristics and methods in order to be successful. In a study conducted in 2018, 91% of people believe that brands facilitate connections between people. 64% of consumers want brands to connect with them and believe that a brand must exude trust for a person to trust and associate with them. People are of the view that brands essentially enhance globalization by connecting people from different cultures and backgrounds and this is an added value and a major plus point for brands. At least 46% of consumers have said that social media has led to them making new connections with other people. Some people would like to connect with likeminded individuals whereas other people, especially liberals, would like to connect with people with different views than themselves. 65% of people feel more genuine connections to brands that have a presence on social media. Consumer engagement is improved when the main operatives like the CEO of the company have active social media presences as this tends to increase brand engagement and it makes a positive impact for the brand. People also want to hear stories from employees about how it is working in such a company and tend to develop a bond with these employees over time. Brands must listen and understand customers' preferences and attitudes before attempting to advertise and manufacture a product as they must identify a target audience that their product will cater to and what will motivate these people to buy their products (Sprout Social, 2018).

Given the above insights and findings, it is important for brands to understand and analyse these changing trends and move to a more holistic approach to messaging, while also maintaining a sense of authenticity. Consumers do not want to see social activism by brands which is a marketing ploy, but transparency about social responsibility (Wertz, 2021). Cultural branding occurs when a brand caters to the culture of a particular country even though they are not actually from there. First, companies have to identify the cultural orthodoxy that they are targeting. Then, they need to locate an opening and then target the crowd culture and try to cater to their needs. It is also better for their image when they introduce novel ideologies so they can stand out to consumers (Wertz, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The above detailed research in the field has shown the progression of brand messaging, and how consumers desire a more holistic and socially oriented brand with more access to technology, social media, and increased awareness. The trend has shifted clearly from one of utilitarian consumption or aspirational consumption, to experiential consumption and engaging with brands who fulfil consumer's self actualisation, their ideologies and social activism. Brands can also bridge gaps and send strong messages of intent by supporting various causes that are collectively backed by communities. Social media and crowdsourced engagement are a key area for brands to tap into, while retaining their authenticity in the process.

A key future area for research is moving beyond an examination of how consumer behaviour and choices are influencing brand messaging and also examining how brands can be drivers of social impact and move consumers towards positive changes, like environmentally friendly behaviour and sustainable consumption. (Pappas, 2021). In this regard, research may be focused on the role of the growing field of impact investment in supporting brands which seek to be profitable, while creating a social impact (Gupta, 2021). There is a need for multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary research to consumer decision making, which also accounts for factors such as gender, class, caste and changing social dynamics.

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