The Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Consumer Entanglement

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This study complements loyalty and lock-in theories, examining socio-cultural underpinnings of continued Facebook patronage. It investigates entanglement dynamics - the socio-cultural mechanisms that entangles and entraps consumers within some of their previous consumption patterns. The research identifies four entanglement dynamics: 1) centrality, 2) pervasiveness, 3) others interdependencies, 4) things interdependencies.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Okay, you may not agree with Facebook, but everyone is on Facebook: straight, gay, black, white, Jewish, Palestinian, socialist, capitalist. If Karl Marx were alive today he would certainly be on Facebook, because you have to propagate your ideas. I think nobody lives without Facebook today. Especially now, that I will start to work. I have to be back on social networks. Companies always ask for your social network profile. I started to think that recruiters would consider it strange that I don’t have a social media network. Until today I think, I’m on Facebook, but I do not want it. But I get it because if I deactivate it, I lose contact with people. (Jane, 24 years, student)

Certain consumption patterns remain in consumers’ lives grudgingly, perpetuating their presence even in the cases where consumers want to move away from these patterns. Some consumption entangles and, in extreme cases, entrap consumers. As in the example above, consumer entanglement occurs when a particular consumption pattern is difficult to suppress or escape when so doing constrains the consumer’s modes of living, including his or her social relations and other types of consumption. The consumer entanglement phenomenon arises when consumption articulates dependence and dependency relationships, creating benefits and value, but also constraining and limiting.

Loyalty studies attempt to capture the nature and stability of the connections formed between the consumer and previous consumption. Although suggesting different dimensions to the loyalty construct, research focusing on attitudinal and affective aspects has the implicit assumption that repeated consumption is mainly volitional and based on positive commitment (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Sirdeshmukh et al, 2002; Oliver, 1999). Other studies delineate loyalty as repetitive purchase highlighting economic and cognitive aspects that prevent switching behavior. Lock-in theories provide evidence that consumers tend to decrease their propensity to search for alternatives and give up previous choices after an initial investment – whether economic (Zauberman, 2003) or an investment in related skills acquisition (Johnson et al. 2003; Murray and Haubl 2007).

These explanations, however, do not fully explain consumer entanglement phenomenon. Why don’t consumers like Jane abandon their previous consumption when they would like to or could so? What explains consumption continuation in the absence of direct economic, physiological, or cognitive barriers for switching?

The goal of this study is to complement economic and cognitive explanations by examining sociocultural underpinnings of continued patronage. This research investigates what we refer as entanglement dynamics - the sociocultural mechanisms that entangle and entrap consumers in their previous consumption.

The limiting and constraining nature of entanglement is best revealed by consumers’ efforts to move away from previous consumption. Based on this premise, we used a multimethod approach incorporating long interviews (McCracken 1988) and observational Netnography (Kozinets, 2002) to investigate consumers’ efforts to quit Facebook. Besides Facebook’s relevance in contemporary society, it presents as a rich context to expand our understanding about consumers’ lock-in since the app and alternative social media offers are both costless and intuitive to use. Generally, users maintain profiles on various social networks. Accordingly, learning how to use an alternative app is not a barrier to abandonment.

Instead of dyadic relations between consumers and consumption objects, this paper theorizes continued patronage as complex assemblages, resulting from the dialectic of dependence and dependency between consumers and things (Hodder, 2012). Dependence exists because consumers rely on things to live. Dependency, in turn, arises when a specific consumption becomes a key part on existing assemblage and make a change at this part has important impacts on its stability. Future consumption is limited and constrained by these previous relations, perpetuating certain patterns. The dependence and dependency dialectics frame loyalty as relational and contextual, with overlapping alliances including other people, things and different consumption practices.

Entanglement involves weblike conditions that arise when consumer cannot manage without a specific consumption. We identify four entanglement dynamics: 1) Centrality occurs when consumption attains a pivotal role in a crucial domain of consumers’ lives; 2) Pervasiveness occurs when certain consumption is pervasive and integrative, permeating different domains of consumer’s lives. 3) Others interdependencies occur when giving up certain consumption significantly affects consumers’ ability to relate to other people; and 4) Things interdependencies occur when giving up certain consumption significantly affects consumer’s ability to relate to other products and perform other consumption activities.

REFERENCES


