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"Running is my boyfriend": consumers' relationships with activities

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Abstract

Purpose - The paper introduces the idea that consumers have relationships with their own recurring activities. Instead of the usual notion of investigating the relationships between actors, or between actors and their possessions, the paper focuses on the relationship between an actor and a particular activity in which the actor regularly participates.

Design/methodology/approach - The paper is conceptual and exploratory in nature. It discusses different perspectives on consumer activity in marketing and then introduces a relationship view of activity. The paper proceeds to outline the conceptual foundations of this view by applying relationship characteristics found in the literature. Quotes from runners' blogs are used to illustrate the different identified relationship themes.

Findings - The paper argues that consumers can be seen as having long-term relationships with their activities, and it introduces the concept of the "activity relationship." The paper proceeds to demonstrate how this concept differs from the previous conceptualization of consumer activity and relationships.

Research limitations/implications - The activity-relationship perspective on consumer behavior opens up new venues for marketing research. It also facilitates new types of marketing practice, whereby producers can focus on supporting their customers' relationships with valuable activities.

Originality/value - The paper presents a novel perspective on relationships. It contributes to consumer research and the customer-dominant view of marketing, whereby the customer's perspective is put in focus and businesses serve as ingredients in the customer's own context.

Paper type – conceptual paper

Introduction

“Running Is My Boyfriend” is the headline of a blog entry written by runner “Louise.” In her blog, she discusses her long-term relationship with the activity of running, which she sees as both meaningful and associated with benefits and sacrifices. The current paper develops this notion in the context of consumer marketing and presents the idea that consumers are able to have relationships with their own recurring activities. The paper does this by applying a relationship marketing perspective to consumer activity, using it as a framework for understanding how consumers relate to their own everyday consumption activities.

In relationship marketing, activities have traditionally been seen as an element that links actors to each other (e.g., the actor–resource–activity model; see Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). In this paper, however, activities are seen as identifiable entities with which consumers maintain relationships. Consequently, the paper will not focus on how consumers relate to providers (or other actors), but rather on how consumers relate to their own recurring activities. For example, people can be considered to have more or less stable relationships with activities, such as jogging, cooking, or showering. Researchers have not, until this point, considered activities in this way. Earlier research has investigated consumers’ attitudes toward behaviors such as complaining (e.g., Richins, 1982), online shopping (e.g., Shergill and Chen, 2005), and work/leisure activities (e.g., Manrai and Manrai, 1995). However, in such cases, the consumer attitudes have not been conceptualized in terms of *relationships* with activities. Rather, the focus has usually been on how consumers relate to behaviors that are part of using a particular product or service or how they feel about certain types of behavior in general. The current paper differs from earlier research by explicitly applying a relationship lens to the link between consumers and their own everyday activities. Thus, by characterizing consumer activities as identifiable and relatable entities, this paper represents a novel perspective on consumer behavior and marketing.

Why is it meaningful to consider consumer activity through a relationship lens? There are several reasons. One is the ongoing emancipation of customers and consumers, which is transforming them from mere choosers into active collaborators in the market space (Beckett and Nayak, 2008; Hippold, 2001). Digitalization has put increasing emphasis on consumers doing things for themselves: For example, instead of going into a bank, where transactions are facilitated by a teller, consumers these days are likely to conduct transactions themselves through apps or online interfaces. Even though a provider is involved in terms of supplying the service interface, it is the consumer who controls the process and does all the work. Concepts such as cocreation (e.g., Cova *et al.*, 2011) and coproduction (e.g., Etgar, 2007) are not always sufficient to describe this phenomenon, as they imply that the consumer works together with the provider. Instead, consumers are often alone with their experiences, even though they might be facilitated by a provider. In the case of wearable devices—such as sports trackers, for example—the device often serves only as an enabling or enhancing element in people’s daily and often private activities (Gilmore, 2015).

Consequently, marketing scholars have presented a view of consumers as *producers*, who, in many cases, act beyond the providing companies’ control or sight (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). This view fits with the above observations about the effects of digitalization; consumers can act independently, and the role of the provider then becomes that of a mere facilitator of customer activity (Mickelsson, 2014). A similar argument has been presented in the context of value creation in service research. According to Grönroos (2011), it is ultimately the customers as users who are in charge of their own value creation and who

then have the option to invite service providers to join their process. Consequently, customer activities have been presented as the *locus* of value creation (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). According to Vargo (2008), “firm activity is best understood in terms of input for the customer’s resource integrating, value creation activities” (p. 214). This clearly shows the relevance of taking an interest in consumer activities: Consumers can increasingly be seen as independent actors who decide when and where to involve providers and who often maintain complete control of the consumption or usage process—that is, control of their own activities. Besides the traditional question regarding the ways in which consumers relate to providers, an interesting and relevant challenge then becomes understanding how consumers relate to their own *activities*.

The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of the “activity-relationship” to marketing. This is done by applying the relationship metaphor to the links that exist between consumers and their own recurring activities. An “activity-relationship” refers to the individual consumer’s relationship with a particular activity. Thus, the term “activity” is used to denote individual behavior rather than, for example, “practice,” which also operates on the interpersonal, social level (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005). The paper builds on earlier research in which the relationship metaphor is applied beyond its original context of B-to-B marketing and brought into new settings, such as consumer marketing (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995), consumer brands (Fournier, 1998), service brands (Sweeney and Chew, 2002), or valued possessions (Karanika and Hogg, 2013).

Drawing inspiration from Fournier’s (1998) extension of the relationship metaphor from people to brands, this paper argues that activities can serve as viable relationship partners for consumers. The paper does this, first, by comparing and contrasting the proposed activity-relationship approach to other existing analytical frames for understanding consumer activity—namely, the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) paradigm (Jacoby, 2002), the interaction approach (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006), practice theory (Warde, 2005), and activity theory (Engeström, 1999). It shows that the activity-relationship approach differs from these neighboring approaches and contributes with a new viewpoint to consumer marketing. Second, the paper outlines the theoretical foundations of the activity-relationship approach by discussing how the different elements of relationship marketing are applicable to consumer activity. The paper illustrates how the elements of relationship marketing can be found in real-life activity contexts by quoting blog entries in which runners discuss their relationships with the activity of running. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the activity-relationship approach opens up new opportunities for research and theory building, as well as its implications for business and further research.

Framing of consumer activity in marketing

This section briefly discusses how consumer activity has been framed in marketing. It presents an alternative “activity-relationship” perspective on consumer activity and explains how this perspective differs from the previous ones. Throughout the section, a gym service will be used as an example to illustrate the difference between the presented frameworks. A gym service retains the sports-focused theme of the examples used later in this paper but serves as a context within which the consequences of the different perspectives on activity are clearer than in the case of running.

Traditionally, marketing has mainly considered consumer activity in accordance with the SOR paradigm of psychological research (see Jacoby, 2002). Within this paradigm, the *organism*

(customers, consumers) receives and processes *stimuli* (communication, servicescape, rewards), which will produce predictable *responses* (emotions, attitudes, behaviors) (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Lantos, 2011, p. 314). This paradigm, and its application in different information-processing models (c.f. Macinnis and Jaworski, 1989), assigns the consumer a somewhat passive and reactive role. The basic assumptions of the SOR paradigm still frame the discussion in such research areas as service design (e.g., Mari and Poggesi, 2013) and advertising (e.g., Wells, 2014). In both of these areas, consumer activity is predominantly considered something that is to be shaped or influenced by stimuli from the provider. For example, when marketing a gym service, the SOR paradigm would frame the problem in terms of how to apply communication or design to influence people so that they will visit the gym, have a positive experience, and maybe buy things while they are there.

The SOR paradigm has traditionally gone hand in hand with a transaction-focused mind-set, whereby consumer activity is mostly considered in terms of consumer choice (Foxall, 1983; Grönroos, 1994). Relationship marketing emerged partly as a reaction to this type of approach and shifted the focus onto long-term buyer–seller relationships (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Grönroos, 1994; Möller and Halinen, 2000). Within the relationship-marketing tradition, activities are seen as part of the interactions that happen within a relationship (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Medlin, 2004). Thus, traditional relationship marketing can be seen as representing an *interaction approach* to consumer activity (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006). Activities have also been seen as companies’ internal events but, in that case, in terms of how business actors coordinate their activities so that they fit with those of other actors (Hallén *et al.*, 1991). Although relationship marketing emerged in a B-to-B research setting, it was later also applied to consumer marketing (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; O’Malley and Tynan, 1999). Moreover, researchers found that consumers not only form relationships with persons but can also maintain relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998; Sweeney and Chew, 2002). Thus, in the example of a gym, the marketing problem would be framed in terms of trying to cultivate profitable long-term relationships between the gym personnel (or gym brand) and its customers by means of facilitating successful interactions.

The concept of cocreation can be seen as a further development of this idea—that is, that customers and providers can cocreate the value that is produced within (and beyond) interactions (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012). Even though the consumer’s value creation may sometimes happen beyond interactions (as in the case of consumer engagement behavior [Doorn *et al.*, 2010], for example), the analytical focus is still on how actors collaborate on facilitating the emergence of value. Thus, cocreation can still be seen as being in line with the relationship tradition.

Subsequently, consumer activity has more recently been studied using the lens of practice theory (e.g., Warde, 2005; Halkier and Jensen, 2011). Practice theory has been used to gain rich understandings of consumption as a socially informed phenomenon (e.g., Martens and Scott, 2005; Valtonen *et al.*; 2010, Arsel and Bean, 2013). The concept of activity plays a core role in practice theory and has been characterized as the outcome of performed practice (Halkier 2010). Warde (2005) states that a social practice constitutes a nexus of practical activity (i.e., doings and sayings) that is coordinated by understandings, procedures, and engagements. These exist largely as shared knowledge on a social level (c.f. Turner, 2007). When an individual puts them into use in a particular situation, they are realized as activities. Halkier (2010) refers to this as “performing practices.” Thus, there is a distinction between the concepts of “activity” and “practice.” Activities constitute a narrower concept, which is

focused on individual performance as it happens in a particular situation. Practices, however, also operate on a more general level and include not only different modes of behavior but also the understandings and socially shared meanings that underlie them. Framed by practice theory, the gym example could then be understood in terms of people's routines and the social meanings informing these routines: For example, what types of discourses or cultural scripts are expressed through the workout behaviors of customers (e.g., Canniford and Shankar, 2013)?

Another emergent perspective on activities is offered by activity theory (Leontyev, 1978; Engeström, 1999). Activity theory has been applied in service research to conceptualize the use of services (Mickelsson, 2013, 2014). In its current form, it was introduced by psychologist A.A. Leontyev and further developed by Yrjö Engeström (Leontyev, 1978; Engeström, 1999). Activity theory views activity in terms of work; it characterizes the concept of "activity" as a subject's purposeful interaction with an object (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006). Thus, activities are performed by people with the intention of producing effects over time either on the object of activity (e.g., a house that gets painted) or on the subject (i.e., the person) performing the activity (Leontyev, 1978; Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006). The main focus of current activity theory is on understanding "activity systems," whereby people interact with tools in a social environment to produce outcomes (Engeström, 1999). This means that activity theory is well suited for analyzing people's interactions with technological systems (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006). Activity theory's interpretation of the gym problem would then be to see the gym as a system of people, tools, and activities. Consumers can engage with this system in order to bring about physical and mental changes in themselves. The challenge for the provider then becomes to organize this system in an efficient way.

The current paper proposes a further analytical frame for understanding consumer activity, called the "activity-relationship" approach. Under the activity-relationship approach, the analytical focus is on the individual's own life processes seen from a personal point of view. Activities are here seen as recurring events in people's lives. This allows people to develop long-term relationships with the activities. Table 1 shows how the activity-relationship approach differs from the previously described four approaches in terms of how it frames activity, conceptualizes behavior, and the type of marketing problem it results in when applied to a marketing context. In the previously described approaches, human behavior is thought of in terms of responses, interactions, social practices, or goal-directed activities. The activity-relationship approach does not exclude these types of understandings but sees them as influencing factors in how a particular person relates to a certain activity. How does a particular person feel about the activity, and how often is it repeated? Thus, the activity-relationship approach focuses on people's *personal relationships* with activities. The corresponding marketing problem will then concern how to help people cultivate their relationships with desired activities. In the case of a gym, this would mean that the gym helps customers develop their own long-term relationships with different types of training activity (e.g., participation in spinning classes) in such a way that it leads to outcomes that the customer desires.

(Insert table 1 about here)

A particular activity can be investigated from the point of view of any of the five approaches (Table 1), but the selected approach will frame the activity and give it meaning accordingly. The first four approaches do not focus on people's relationships with activities as such, but rather on how the activity serves as a medium for reacting, relating, expressing, or performing in various contexts. In the activity-relationship approach, however, the focus is specifically on

how consumers themselves see and relate to the activity. This reframes the role of marketing to focus on supporting consumers' long-term activity relationships. The next part will consider the conceptual foundations of this perspective.

Conceptual foundations of the activity-relationship view

This section discusses the conceptual foundations of the proposed activity-relationship view. It considers how relationship marketing has been conceptualized by previous research and whether existing relationship conceptualizations are applicable to the link between consumers and their recurring activities. The section first identifies which elements are central to relationship marketing and then discusses how the identified elements apply to consumer activities. To show how the themes can be found in practical consumer contexts, each presented element is exemplified by a set of quotes from runners' blogs. In the quotes, runners discuss their relationships with the activity of running. Runners were selected because they can be expected to be able to articulate their relationship with this particular activity. The blog entries were found through an online search and are presented anonymously with changed names. Thus, consent should not be required (Kozinets, 2002). Blog entries as research material have been argued to provide candid and easily accessible insights into people's everyday lives, allowing people to share their personalities, passions, and points of view (Nardi *et al.*, 2004; Hookway, 2008). However, blog entries must be treated with some caution, as people may want to present an idealized image of themselves (Hookway, 2008). The quoted blogs tended to be candid, however, often openly discussing the hardships of life and running.

In line with Mickelsson (2013), "consumer activities" are here defined as recurring, discrete sequences of behavior that are driven by a set of conscious and unconscious motives and that aim at a set of outcomes. This definition is consistent with Schatzki (2010, p. 111), who characterizes activities as aimed at achieving a particular outcome (i.e., they are done "in order to") and as being framed by a set of existing conditions (done "because of"). This definition allows us to consider activities as identifiable objects. Research has also shown that people are able to identify their activities (Vallacher and Wegner, 1987) and may, thus, be able to maintain relationships with them.

To outline the core conceptual elements of relationship marketing, the paper applies Harker's (1999) review of relationship marketing definitions and Fournier's (1998) four foundations of brand relationships. Harker's (1999) review collects 26 popular definitions and analyzes them for central conceptual meanings. He identifies seven main abstractions that are consistently present in definitions of relationship marketing: "interaction," "output," "long term," "creation," "development," "maintenance," and "emotional content." These abstractions can be categorized according to the questions asked under Fournier's (1998) four more general relationship themes: 1) whether the object can serve as a valid relationship partner, 2) whether the relationship with the object can be discussed in terms of temporality and dynamism, 3) whether said relationship functions as a source of meaning for the consumer, and, finally, 4) whether this type of relationship can be seen as a multiplex phenomenon. The next section follows Fournier's (1998) thematic outline for relationships and includes Harker's (1999) abstractions under the appropriate theme. The purpose of the section is to consider whether the themes are applicable to consumers' relationships with their activities.

The activity as a relationship partner

The first of Harker's (1999) abstractions—"interaction"—is arguably the central abstraction in relationship marketing (Grönroos, 1994; Ballantyne and Varey, 2006). It refers to the mutuality of relationship partners—that is, that both parties are active and contribute to the relationship. Fournier (1998) calls this "reciprocity." The problem of whether the consumer can have interaction and reciprocity with activities will be discussed next. The current section will also discuss Harker's second abstraction—"output"—which can be seen as another term for understanding what relationship partners gain from a relationship. "Output" is, thus, intimately connected to the idea of reciprocity.

Is it, then, possible to consider an activity a "partner" or something animate or humanized in the way in which Fournier (1998) considers brands? The psychological literature mainly understands activities as the expression of internal states, and, thus, activity and action tend to be seen as the results of motivation or goals (e.g., Kopetz *et al.*, 2012). This means that activities are generally seen as inputs or consequences rather than objects in themselves. However, researchers have shown that people can generate and maintain *attitudes* toward activities (Eyal *et al.*, 2004). For example, researchers have studied people's attitudes toward physical activities (Simon and Smoll, 1974), rehabilitation activities (Fisher and Hoisington, 1993), and reading (Askov and Fischbach, 1973). Writers in leisure research have suggested the term "activity attachment" to denote the functional, symbolic, and emotional importance of a particular leisure activity for consumers (Alexandris *et al.*, 2011).

However, even though this indicates that consumers are able to relate to activities, it is not sufficient to support the "personhood" claim. Fournier (1998) draws on theories of animism and anthropomorphization to argue that people are able to assign selective human properties to all manner of objects. The same may be applicable in the case of activities: The personification of abstract concepts has a long history in human thought (Paxson, 1994). For example, early Greek writers gave human forms to basic human phenomena such as war, sleep, prayer, or rumor (Webster, 1954). Contemporary consumers may be capable of similar types of personification. Indeed, runners' blogs provide many examples of personification. One blog entry, titled "Running Is My Boyfriend," provides an especially revealing example of this particular blogger's comfort with the relationship metaphor. In this entry, blogger "Louise" compares her injury-induced hiatus from running to breaking up with a long-term boyfriend: "After spending 8 months, the longest duration of time off from running in over a decade, I have come to realize that my relationship with running is much like a teenage love affair." She discusses her feelings about not being able to run in terms of rejection and even jealousy:

[. . .] every time you see someone else who is enjoying the sport, it feels like your love is cheating on you. I probably didn't appreciate "him" as much as I should have when I had him. I took him for granted and now it's too late—he has rejected me. The long, comfortable relationship I had with "him" over the past decade became too complacent and he moved on to someone else.

However, Fournier (1998) claims that personhood is not enough to make a valid relationship partner. One of marketing's most basic assumptions about relationships is that they involve reciprocity and mutually oriented interaction between the parties (e.g., Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Harker, 1999). Thus, the parties must be involved in some type of mutual exchange or cooperation. Strictly speaking, people cannot be said to "interact" with activities. Rather, activities and actions have traditionally been seen as the *medium* for subjects to interact with

objects (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006) or for subjects to reach their objectives (Harré, 1982). However, theories of a “dialogical self” (Hermans *et al.*, 1992) postulate that the self is not unified but can occupy many different positions, which can be engaged in dialogical relations with each other. Thus, from the consumer’s own subjective point of view, the idea of interacting with your own activities may very well be viable. Activities such as substance abuse, for example, are often discussed in terms of costs and rewards for the subject (c.f. West and Brown, 2013). In his autobiography, writer Jack London personifies his drinking problem as “John Barleycorn” and talks about how John “tricks and lures” and “must have his due” (London, 1913, p. 5). Thus, it is feasible that consumers can have some kind of give-and-take relationship with a particular activity. If this is the case, consumers can be said to experience mutuality. For example, blogger “Michelle” writes about her complicated relationship with running due to the physical discomfort it brings. Despite this, the rewards make her want to return to the activity: “In many ways I hate doing it, it can be uncomfortable, and sore. It can be pretty boring too. However it keeps calling me back.” Blogger “Ruth” displays similar sentiments and elaborates on them somewhat:

I won’t lie to you: sometimes running hurts and sometimes I hate it. Sometimes I believe we aren’t good for each other. [. . .] Runner’s high is also a real thing and I often find myself craving it. The endorphins you feel when you are attracted to someone, it’s pretty comparable. I can’t say I’m addicted to running, or that I love it, but I can vouch for how it makes me feel.

These quotes exemplify situations where consumers seem to be experiencing some kind of mutuality and interaction with the activity. This mutuality is completely subjective, however, as activities cannot be seen as having agency or “will” as such. The quote by “Ruth” also relates to the second of Harker’s (1999) abstractions: “output.” Output refers to the outcomes of a relationships, in terms of, for example, profitability. The quote illustrates how the activity of running is associated with both benefits and sacrifices and that the consumer seems to consider the activity in such terms. Indeed, traditional conceptualizations of action and activity have characterized them in terms of aiming at some type of outcome (Moya, 1990). Thus, the theme of “output” also seems applicable to activities.

Temporality and dynamism

The next four of Harker’s (1999) abstractions (“long term,” “creation,” “development,” and “maintenance”) all relate to the ideas of time and change in relationships. They can, thus, be summarized as describing temporality and dynamism, the second of Fournier’s (1998) relationship themes. This section will discuss whether these concepts are applicable to activity relationships.

A central attribute of relationship marketing is that it looks beyond individual transactions and instead focuses on long-term relationships (Grönroos, 1994). Fournier (1998) calls this temporality. In relationship marketing, relationships are usually seen as a process with a beginning, middle, and end (Harker, 1999). Similarly, consumers’ relationships with activities are likely to go through equivalent stages. For example, researchers have looked at how and why people start smoking (Lucas and Lloyd, 1999) and their experiences of quitting (Ershler *et al.*, 1989). This represents a temporal view of activities and indicates that a similar approach can be viable in a marketing context. As an example of the temporality of consumers’ relationships with activities, Blogger “Linda” discusses how her relationship started in early childhood:

It was a chilly day and the rain pelted down with force, while stampedes of runners gathered eagerly at the start. There I was, ready to take off right along with the rest of them, bundled up in the stroller, and shielded by my clip-on umbrella that stood firmly in place to ward off the rain drops. “Faster mommy faster,” I yelled as she pushed me along in front of her.

She discusses how she later did not share her parents’ enthusiasm for running. She disliked it for physical—and maybe also emotional—reasons: “I would never be like my parents. I didn’t want to love it like that,” she writes. However, after a tonsil operation, breathing became easier. Her physical outlook changed, and she started training for a marathon. Crossing the finish line at the marathon, she started to understand how her parents felt: “For the first time I could see how someone could love running. For the first time, I loved running.” As indicated by the example, it should be possible for researchers to capture deep and detailed histories of people’s relationships with their own activities and how they begin, develop, and ultimately end.

This also reflects another important aspect of the temporal dimension of relationships, which is their *dynamism*. In relationship marketing, the marketing process is usually conceptualized as a series of interactions (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006; Holmlund, 2004). Each interaction between a consumer and a particular provider results in a customer experience and contributes to what the consumer thinks about the provider (Payne *et al.*, 2009; Meyer and Schwager, 2007). Similarly, it is possible to consider consumers’ relationships to *activities* as a sequence of events: Each time a consumer engages in a particular activity, his or her impression of the activity changes. This constitutes a dynamic view of the relationship. Indeed, health and medical research has often applied a dynamic, long-term view to tracking changes in people’s physical activities over time (e.g., Sallis *et al.*, 1999; Marcus *et al.*, 2000). Thus, it should be possible to find different types of relationship development trajectories, as described by Fournier (1998), for activity relationships as well. Moreover, the concept of critical incidents might help shed light on dynamism in this context (Butterfield *et al.*, 2005; Edvardsson and Roos, 2001). A particularly good or bad experience with an activity might lead to changes in the consumer’s activity relationship. For example, blogger “Ruby” writes about how success in a race served as a formative event in her relationship with running:

Last year I competed in my first Race for Life, a run to raise money to help fight cancer. It isn’t necessarily a competitive run; however I managed to come within the top ten runners, out of thousands of women and girls. Since then, my love for the sport has increased and this has meant that I have been able to run further and faster than ever before.

Thus, it should be possible to discover typical critical events that have an impact on a person’s relationship with a particular activity. Both temporality and dynamism seem to be innate characteristics of people’s relationships with activities.

Emotional content and meaning provision

The final of Harker’s (1999) seven abstractions—“emotional content”—refers to the interpersonal emotions that arise within relationships. Events that happen within a relationship result in different types of emotions, which then impact the further development of the relationship. This relates to Fournier’s (1998) theme of “meaning provision,” whereby relationships provide meaning in the parties’ lives. Emotional content can be seen as an indicator of meaning for consumers and is, thus, discussed in this subsection.

Can activity relationships be said to have emotional content? Marketing traditionally operates in the spirit of the SOR paradigm, which means that the literature has tended to consider consumer activity as a *consequence* of emotional states (Hirschman and Stern, 1999). Thus, emotions are seen as causing future activity instead of vice versa. However, within the relationship-marketing domain, emotions constitute part of the *content* of relationships (Harker, 1999): The emotions are a part of how the parties relate to each other (Butler, 2011), as well as the result of experiences within interactions (Payne *et al.*, 2009). If we apply this conception of emotion to the activity-relationship view, it means that activities can be seen as the *objects* or *sources* of emotion (e.g., “I love swimming; it felt really good yesterday”) rather than simply *the result* of emotions (e.g., “I feel good; let’s go swimming”). Thus, for example, the concept of commitment is applicable to activity relationships. Blogger “Linda” provides an example of emotions emerging during an activity and how this has influenced her relationship with running:

March of last year I completed the Rock N’ Roll Half Marathon in New Orleans. I teared up at the start. I teared up while running. I teared up crossing the finish line. I never imagined I would grow to become so emotionally involved with and committed to running. But there I was. And here I am.

Besides just emotions, Fournier (1998) argues that relationships also add structure or meaning to people’s lives. Thus, meaning provision can be seen as another requirement for relationships. The different types of meanings provided by activities are well documented. For example, research in the consumer culture theory tradition has focused on how consumer activities “foster collective identifications grounded in shared beliefs, meanings, mythologies, rituals, social practices, and status systems” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 874). Various studies have researched the symbolic meanings of activities such as skydiving (Celci *et al.*, 1993), Christmas rituals (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009), and taking selfies (Iqani and Schroeder, 2015). As an example of meaning provision, blogger “Emily” writes about how running has impacted her self-image and body relationship:

[. . .] what running has given to me is a true respect of my body that I did not have before! I am by no means saying that every time I look in the mirror I love what I see, but I now respect what I see, because I know the amount of miles and sun salutations it has taken to get my body as strong as it is today.

In contrast, blogger “Lisa” discusses how running for her was mostly motivated by external factors: “I always enjoyed running [;] however the motivation to run and compete was originaly [sic] linked to a negative self belief, needing to meet the expectations of myself and those around me.” This exemplifies how people’s relationships with activities can be intertwined with emotions and meaning.

Multiplicity in relationships

Finally, Fournier (1998) identifies an important theme that was not covered by Harker (1999)—namely, “multiplicity.” This refers to the idea that relationships come in many different shapes. Fournier argues that relationships are multiplex phenomena—that is, that they can have many different forms and functions. In her paper, she found that brand relationships could be classified into various forms, such as “arranged marriages,” “courtships,” “flings,” and “enslavements” (p. 362). Presumably, people’s relationships with activities could be classified in a similar way. This entails that consumers can apply the relationship metaphor in a deep and meaningful way and come up with different interpretations and labels for their activity

relationships. As an example, blogger “Lisa” talks about her “full blown, obsessive relationship” with running. She goes on to write:

It is also a unique relationship. My bond towards running will be different to everyone else’s. We each take what we require and/or value out of the experience in our own individual way.

Another example shows how one particular activity relationship can have multiple meanings for one person. Blogger “Jesse” writes about how the character of his relationship with running varies from one day to the next: On a good day, it is like a “full blown steamy love affair”; on other days, like a “25-year marriage,” or “having a brother,” sometimes a “mentor/mentee,” or simply a “best friend.” Thus, it should be possible to find many different types of categories for people’s activity relationships.

In summary, this section considered the conceptual foundations of consumers’ relationships with their activities and concluded that the relationship metaphor is applicable to consumer activities. The next section will present some conclusions and consider the implications of the activity-relationship view for marketing theory and practice.

Conclusions and implications

In marketing, consumer activities have previously been seen as a medium for responding, relating, performing, or interacting. However, the consumer’s activities themselves have not been seen as relatable objects. Rather, relationship marketing has seen activities as *part* of relationships—for example, as in the actor–resource–activity model (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). The main contribution of this paper was to apply a relationship perspective to consumer activities. The paper introduced the idea of consumers having relationships with their own activities, which resulted in the “activity-relationship” perspective on marketing. Instead of focusing on how consumers relate to other actors (or objects), the analytical focus is on understanding how they relate to their own activities. The paper compared the activity-relationship approach with other existing approaches to understanding consumer activity in marketing (i.e., the SOR approach, the interaction approach, practice theory, and activity theory) and found that the previously existing approaches do not focus on the consumers’ relationships with their own activities. Even though practice theory and activity theory expressly include people’s activities and the meaning structures that accompany them, their analytical focus is elsewhere. Consequently, the activity-relationship approach is unique and complements established perspectives on consumer activity.

The paper builds on earlier research that applies the relationship metaphor in new contexts, such as consumer markets (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995), brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), and valued possessions (Karanika and Hogg, 2013), but takes a fundamentally different approach. Instead of simply extending the relationship metaphor to a new type of object, the paper challenges the established view of what, in fact, constitutes relatable objects. Previously, relationship partners have been seen as external entities with tangible features (i.e., a person, brand, or physical object). An activity, however, is not external as such but can be considered a part of the consumer him- or herself. Drawing upon literature on multiple selves and the personification of activities, the paper argued for the idea of an activity as a relatable object in its own right. Moreover, the paper showed how the basic abstractions of relationship marketing are applicable to consumers’ relationships with activities. The quotes from bloggers used in the

text served as examples of consumers spontaneously expressing the identified themes, giving credibility to the idea of activities as relatable entities.

Thus, the activity-relationship concept contributes with a new perspective on consumption and marketing. In addition to studying actor-to-actor (or actor-to-object) relationships, marketers can now also start researching actor-to-activity relationships. This reapplication of the relationship metaphor introduces an additional role for marketing: To support and help consumers in cultivating desired activity relationships. This involves keeping track of relevant activity relationships among customers, understanding their history and development, and creating strategies for supporting the development of desired or valuable activity relationships or their termination. The role of a given business offering then becomes to serve as an enabling or supporting element in the consumer's recurring activities.

However, it is worth noting that people do not always necessarily reflect very deeply on their own activities. Studies have suggested that about 45% of our daily behavior is directed by habit (Neal *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, habits tend to guide behavior more strongly than expressed intentions (Ji and Wood, 2007). This means that even in cases in which consumers are able to reflect on their own activities, they might not necessarily be able to change them. Moreover, the quotes that were used in this paper to illustrate the different relationship themes were taken from highly involved runners, who may be much better at articulating how they relate to the activity than a less engaged consumer would. Thus, it remains to be seen whether there are differences in how well the relationship metaphor applies to activities among different consumer groups.

Future research could apply and develop the activity-relationship idea through dedicated empirical studies. Such studies could focus on characterizing different types of relationships with activities: Researchers could actively look for, for example, “arranged marriages,” “rebounds,” or “childhood friendships” (in the mold of Fournier [1998]). Future research could also uncover generic development trajectories for people's activity relationships. In-depth insight into such categories and trajectories could lead to suggestions of different types of business strategies, depending on what type of activity a company wishes to support.

For businesses, consumer activity relationships provide a new framework for working with customer behavior. By keeping track of relevant consumer activities and understanding the consumer's relationships with these activities—at different levels of interest or at different stages of life—companies can work toward supporting customer value in a structured way. Researchers have suggested that value for the customer emerges in the customer's own activities (Normann 2001; Grönroos 2008). Why not make a structured effort to analyze different customer groups' relationships to core (and related) consumption activities in order to be able to develop them further? The approach suggested in this paper may be employed to shed light on diverse phenomena such as resource integration and cocreation (Ple, 2016), customer engagement behavior (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), or the gamification of services (Harwood and Garry, 2015). What types of everyday activities do the phenomena consist of, and how do the consumers relate to them? Can the company facilitate the development of these activities and support positive attitudes toward them? The approach enables us to analyze businesses' efforts in these domains with a new purpose in mind: Instead of focusing on what a service (or product) does, and how the consumer uses (or contributes to) the service, marketers can instead focus on the consumers' relationships to their own activities and how to support and develop them so that the consumer can attain valuable experiences and outcomes over time. This is in line with the “customer-dominant logic” of service (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Heinonen and

Strandvik, 2015), whereby companies' offerings are considered from the point of view of the customer's own context. By focusing on how customers relate to their own activities, the provider is given a secondary position in the analysis. This leads to a truly consumer- or customer-centric view.

To conclude, the idea of considering consumers as having relationships with activities proved surprisingly fruitful and can hopefully inspire more research on the subject.

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Approaches to activity	SOR approach	Interaction approach	Practice Theory	Activity Theory	Activity-relationship approach
Examples of literature	Jacoby, 2002; Lantos, 2011	Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Medlin, 2004	Warde, 2005; Halkier and Jensen, 2011	Leontyev, 1978; Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006	Current paper
Activity framed by	Individual's psychological processes	Business relationships	Shared social world	Organization of work	Individual's life processes
Behavior conceptualized as	Response to stimuli	Interaction in relationships	Practices in social contexts	Activity aimed at producing outcomes	Recurring activities that people relate to
Resulting marketing problem	How can we directly influence people?	How can we develop mutually profitable long-term business relationships?	How can we understand consumption as a social phenomenon?	How can we organize systems of work?	How can we help people cultivate their own relationships with activities?

Table 1: Approaches to activity in marketing