Conceptualizing the Role of Mindful Consumption in Shaping Consumer Happiness

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Extended Abstract

The concepts of well-being and happiness have oftentimes been subject to scientific research; however, it is still hard to find one single agreed definitions of what well-being and happiness are. Different theories and academics, countries and cultures sometimes use the same word to refer to a variety of concepts. Considering the terms of happiness and subjective well-being, majority of authors (e.g., Kahneman 1999; Diener 2000; Ivens 2007; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade 2005) use happiness and subjective well-being as synonymous and for the purpose of this study we plan to follow their lead. In the field of psychology, happiness is closely linked to emotions and mood (Diener 1994; Lyubomirsky 2001; Lyubomirsky & Ross 1997, 1999; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, & Kasri 2001) but is distinguished from them in that emotions and mood are temporal states while happiness is conceptualized as long lasting and stable (Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman 1987; Diener 1994).

One of the most important ways in which people pursue their happiness in a consumerist society is consumption, therefore consumer happiness is an important concept that deserves attention in the marketing literature as well as in business practises. In our study we adopt the definition of Merunka and Sirgy (2011, p. 21) who describe consumer happiness (CH) or consumer well-being (CWB) as “a judgment made by consumers regarding the extent to which the focal brand/company makes a significant contribution to his or her quality of life”. Marketing can play an important role in enhancing happiness (Baker 2009). Therefore, scholars, companies and policy makers must act in a way that is beneficial to consumers by enhancing their well-being. Marketers have the power of making consumers happy, not by just consuming more, but consuming in a way that will benefit individual consumers and society on the long run and at the same time have less of an impact on the environment (Zhong & Mitchell 2013). Consumption is not only a basic necessity for survival, it is also critical to our personal, social and economic well-being. Considering this we cannot ignore the impact of consumption on CH. However, in recent years there is a growing realization that consumption can have both positive and negative consequences for the consumer, for the society, for business and the environment (Crocker & Linden 1998; Quelch & Jocz 2007). Overconsumption and its consequences are evident especially in the developed world, particularly in the U.S. and European countries. Needless to say, that today’s rising consumption is neither sustainable nor healthy (Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas 2011).

Overconsumption not only affects our environment but is also an individual consumer’s problem and societal problem (Quelch & Jocz 2007). Consumers are increasingly recognizing that growth in individual material consumption may not be compatible with the well-being of the individuals as well as larger (Feldman 1972). If consumers move away from their focus on material acquisitions and toward non-material quality of life concerns, then they will consume less from the economic system.
For example, green and ethical consumers are willing to consume less, compromise on price, brand, convenience, or even product performance, to ensure that their consumptions are achieved in line with their principles (Dierksmeier & Pirson 2009; McDonald et al. 2009; Pepper et al. 2009). One of the solutions suggested in the literature to tackle the problematic nature of overconsumption and its negative consequences is mindful consumption.

Mindful consumption (MC) as an interplay of consumption and mindfulness “is premised on a consumer mindset of caring for self, for community, and for nature, that translates behaviourally into tempering the self-defeating excesses associated with acquisitive, repetitive and aspirational consumption.” (Sheth et al. 2011). Following this definition, MC is well-aligned with consumer well-being and their quality of life (Malhotra 2006). Businesses are, with the help of marketing, able to transform mindful consumption to a business opportunity by generating win-win solutions that consider planet, people, and profit (Sheth et al. 2011), which in turn bring about loyal and satisfied customers (Drucker 1973; Sheth and Sisodia 2006) and have positive effect on consumer happiness (Malhotra, Lee & Uslay 2012). As suggested by Sheth et al. (2011), MC is a complex concept structured into three pillars: (1) caring for self, (2) caring for community, and (3) caring for environment. Caring for self consists of caring for one’s well-being and long term happiness (Sheth et al. 2011). We build on the notion that caring for self might be tightly linked to non-material consumption such as experiential consumption. We propose that the concept of caring for self is captured in experiential consumption described as an intention of acquiring a life experience (e.g. an event or series of events) (Van Boven & Gilovich 2003). It has been suggested that material possessions bring consumers happiness when they use them, but not so much when they merely think about them. However, experiences bring happiness in both cases (Loewenstein 1999). Interestingly, merely consumer’s thoughts about experiences influence their level of happiness (Carter & Gilovich 2010). A recent study conducted by Dunn, Gilbert and Wilson (2011) further supports the importance of experiential consumption by showing that consumers report greater derived happiness from their experiential purchase in comparison to their material purchase. Since increased consumption of material goods doesn’t have an increased positive effect on consumer happiness (Frank 2004) and since caring for self is strongly linked to non-material consumption, such as experiential consumption, we propose that experiential consumption defines this first pillar.

The second dimension recognized as instrumental to mindful consumption is caring for community (Sheth et al. 2011). Overconsumption has harmful effects on common good and personal well-being that is why caring for community is essential for collective well-being as well as individual well-being (Sheth et al., 2011). Most people find happiness in a social context, and in the relationships they have with others, therefore vibrant local communities and equitable society are essential to happiness (Whybrow 2005). According to Mohr, Webb and Harris (2001), a socially responsible consumer avoids buying products from companies that harm society and actively seeks products from companies that help the society. We may conclude that the process of taking into consideration the public consequences of one’s private choices is at the heart of socially responsible consumption (SRC) (Lecompte & Roberts, 2006). Whereas the majority of authors employ the term SRC, others speak of ethical consumption. Ethics refers to moral principles or values which generally govern the conduct of individuals or groups. Consuming in an ethical manner means consuming in accordance with society’s view of “good” (Smith 1990). Ethical consumption incorporates a variety of consumption activities, including the purchasing of Fairtrade and environmentally friendly products and the conscious boycotting of products that have been produced by companies with a poor ethical reputation (Sudbury, Kohlbacher & Hofmeister 2012). Both SRC and ethical consumption take into consideration the well-being of community and therefore reflect the second pillar of mindful consumption.

Today, one of the biggest challenges associated with environmental issues concerns consumption patterns and consumer lifestyles (Lecompte & Roberts 2006). Consumer caring for environment is
promoting the consumption of goods and services that have a reduced adverse environmental impact (Paavola 2001) and will not compromise the needs of future generations (Hansen & Schrader 1997). Such mindset led us to suggest that caring for environment is embedded in sustainable and green consumption. In this paper we follow a widely used definition of sustainability which states that sustainability is met when meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations 1987). We will define green consumption as conscious and deliberate decision to make certain consumption choices due to personal moral beliefs and values' (Crane & Matten 2004) that illustrate the framework of environmental friendly behaviour (Withanachchi 2013). Environmentalists argue that a major change in the nature of consumption is necessary, one in which goods are produced in ways that safeguard the environment and in which conservation of resources rather than obsolescence of consumer goods is a major target in the production and consumption of goods (Crane, 2010).

A review of the existing literature on consumer happiness and well-being indicates that there are several competing or alternative models that aim to explore the dynamics of CH (e.g. Sheth et al. 2011; Zhong & Mitchell 2013; El Hedhi, Chebat & Sirgy 2013; Yang & Stening 2012; Swart & Rothmann 2012). Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies on how MC is related to CH. These two constructs have not been studied together in a single study. Given the need for a more overarching approach, a comprehensive yet relatively simple framework of consumer happiness and mindful consumption is proposed.

The theoretical grounding is found in the Sheth et al.’s (2011) conceptualization of mindful consumption and proposes that MC has a positive influence on CH through three important constructs that each have a positive effect on consumer happiness. These are: (1) caring for self, expressed by experiential consumption, (2) caring for society, which we observe through socially responsible consumption and ethical consumption, and (3) caring for environment expressed through green and sustainable consumption. In addition, we suggest that CH results in two company-relevant outcomes, i.e. consumer loyalty and consumer satisfaction. Research in the area of consumer satisfaction (Oliver 2010) proposes that consumer satisfaction and happiness are related constructs. Since consumers with high levels of comfort are more likely to be happy with their current situation and less likely to actively seek out change (Labrecque, Krishen & Grzeskowiak 2011) we may conclude that CH has a direct positive impact on loyalty and satisfaction of consumers.

To overview, the framework is based on literature review and conceptualizes the influence of MC on CH. First, the model presents the interrelation of experiential consumption, socially responsible consumption, ethical consumption, green consumption and sustainable consumption with three main dimensions of the mindful consumption construct. Second, it draws a positive relationship between two main constructs: mindful consumption and consumer happiness. Third, it shows the impact of consumer happiness on consumer loyalty and consumer satisfaction. In order to provide a more systematic view of the conceptual model, we lay out the following propositions stemming from the conceptual model:

P1: Mindful consumption has a positive influence on consumer happiness.

P1a: Experiential consumption has a positive influence on consumer happiness.

P1b: Socially responsible consumption has a positive influence on consumer happiness.

P1c: Ethical consumption has a positive influence on consumer happiness.

P1d: Green consumption has a positive influence on consumer happiness.

P1e: Sustainable consumption has a positive influence on consumer happiness.

P2: Consumer happiness has a positive influence on consumer loyalty.

P3: Consumer happiness has a positive influence on consumer satisfaction.
This study extends previous research on consumer happiness by exploring a missing link between mindful consumption and consumer happiness. It also suggests consequential factors of consumer happiness and thus advances our understanding of the intricate nature of this concept. In addition, we respond to the call of Malhotra, Lee and Uslay (2012) for further theoretical refinement of the relatively new concept of mindful consumption.

Based on the aforementioned propositions, consumers may derive greater happiness from following certain consumption patterns. Notwithstanding the early stage of the conceptualization, some potential implications for companies may be foreseen. The first pertains to marketing strategies that concern the willingness of management to invest some effort into increasing mindful consumption. A policy promoting MC would have a positive effect on CH and well-being, which would increase consumer loyalty and satisfaction, and these would in turn create a positive loop-back effect on sales and profits of businesses. Second, there are significant implications that show that engaging in marketing activities that promote MC and increase consumer happiness is a worthwhile endeavour for businesses. Such marketing activities are welcome and sometimes even necessary since firms are asked to support charities, protect the environment, and contribute to social causes (Mohr, Webb and Harris 2001).

References