

The Power of Personal

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Abstract

Technological advances, originating in the time of the industrial revolution and accelerating today, have alienated workers from consumers, and vice versa. We argue that this alienation and accompanying feelings of being objectified as a mere interchangeable source of profit are aversive to workers and consumers. These feelings reduce the meaningfulness and satisfaction workers find in their work and make products less attractive and consumption less meaningful to consumers. We propose simple and inexpensive interventions that can be used to make business more personal, with powerful effects on workers' job satisfaction, product quality, and product attractiveness to consumers. Paradoxically, these interventions often rely on the same technological advances that otherwise facilitate the alienation. We specifically highlight how disclosing personal information (e.g., name, personal background) about workers and consumers can impact the motivation and performance of workers. We also highlight how disclosing personal information about workers and consumers can impact consumers' satisfaction, preferences, and willingness-to-pay. We argue that providing personal information about workers to consumers and vice versa will often yield a win-win-win effect. As more satisfied customers buy more at higher prices, more satisfied workers do a better job, and personal information can be disclosed cheaply using information technology, companies benefit from increased sales at higher prices and at very little extra cost.

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Prior to the industrial revolution, producers—defined for our analysis as the individuals who actually make or produce products and services (i.e., workers and self-employed producers as opposed to firms, brands, or owners)—would frequently interact directly with the people who consumed the products they produced. For example, a master craftsperson making shoes would also function as retailer and interact directly with the customer buying the shoes. Since the industrial revolution, we have moved farther and farther away from this model. Advances

in manufacturing, farming, retailing, and transportation technology have made production much more efficient by organizing production in large, hierarchical social units and breaking up the production process so that every producer concentrates on just one or a few subtasks. This efficiency allows more products to be produced at lower cost. The greater availability of products at lower cost has clearly benefited consumers. Eventually, once they had managed to appropriate some of the rewards from their higher productivity, producers also benefited through higher earnings and more free time. More recently, a wave of progress in information technology has accelerated productivity improvement, not only in industries such as manufacturing and farming but increasingly also in retail and service industries. For example, a customer at Starbucks no longer has to talk to a barista to get their coffee. Instead, the customer can just order through an app and pick up their coffee without any

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human interaction. Checks can now be deposited conveniently and cheaply via smartphones rather than with the aid of a teller at a retail bank branch. Thus, production and retailing have become more efficient throughout our economy, with obvious benefits to companies and consumers in terms of availability, cost, and convenience.

Despite the clear advantages to businesses and consumers, these changes have also led to an increased anonymity in the marketplace. Whereas previously producers would interact directly with their customers, since the industrial revolution and increasingly today producers often know nothing about the consumers of their products and vice versa (cf. Simmel 1903/2012; Simmel, /, 2012; Simmel 1903/2012). In this respect, we found Karl Marx (1844/1993); Marx, 2019; Marx (1844/1993) stimulating who argued that in such a mass production setting producers might not only be alienated from the products they produce (as producers are only involved in one or few of many steps in a production process), but they might be also alienated from consumers (as producers are no longer in personal contact with consumers and therefore cannot see how consumers benefit from the fruits of their labor). According to Marx, this alienation deprives production of meaning and the deprivation of meaning is so important that it even deprives producers of their humanity (in that they feel to be mere cogs in a machine rather than individual human beings). This sense of loss of humanity evokes the concept of objectification (Nussbaum 1995), which denotes that humans (for example in the case of pornography) sometimes are, and feel, treated as objects, with clear, negative consequences to the objectified individual. It is not a large stretch, then, to assume that separation from consumers is accompanied by a feeling in producers of being treated as numbers, objects, mere interchangeable sources of revenue for the company's owners. This alienation and sense of objectification is relevant to the retail industry, as many retailers today produce a large percentage of their products (e.g., Domino's pizza, IKEA's furniture, Starbuck's coffee) and are enthusiastic users of human-contact replacing technology such as online, app-based ordering and various forms of (automated) home delivery. One might have expected that technology-enhanced disintermediation, whereby manufacturers start retailing directly to consumers (e.g., Alpacka inflatable kayaks, Dell computers, Thomas Moser furniture, Tesla cars) would bring producers and consumers closer together, thereby reducing alienation of producers from consumers. However, this disintermediation has often not brought producers closer to consumers at a personal level, as the retailing function is often performed largely through remote, online channels.

We propose that reducing the estrangement (“Entfremdung” in the original work by Marx) between producers and consumers will reduce producers' sense of being objectified. We also propose that this reduction in producers' sense of objectification makes producers' work more meaningful, leading to increased work satisfaction, work motivation, increased quality of products they produce, and increased willingness to accept the work. In addition, we propose that these results can be achieved using simple interventions that can often be executed at scale and with the help of widely available information technologies.

Thus, technology may not only cause or facilitate alienation and objectification, it may also be used to *reduce* alienation and objectification by making business more personal.

Whereas alienation from the producer perspective has drawn considerable attention from scholars across a wide range of disciplines, its mirror image has received much less attention (for exceptions, see Allison 1978; Campbell 2005; Holt 2002; Pruden and Longman 1972; see also Erikson 1986). If producers feel separated from consumers, then consumers may also feel separated from producers. Due to classical industrial production but also due to new retail technologies (such as ordering apps, touchscreen terminals, online commerce, and increasingly the use of augmented reality and robots) that reduce contact between consumers and producers, it is also *consumers* that may feel increasingly estranged from producers. This feeling of estrangement on the part of consumers may be accompanied by a sense of being objectified, that is, feeling treated as numbers, objects, and mere interchangeable sources of revenue.

We thus argue that alienation is not restricted to the producer. Rather, we propose that alienation can go “two ways” – alienation of the producer from the consumer but also alienation of the consumer from the producer. The next question then becomes how to reduce this sense of alienation and the accompanying feelings of objectification.

There are many ways to bring producers and consumers closer together, including actually getting producers and consumers to interact directly, but we propose that cheap and simple interventions short of actual personal interaction can be found that still make the marketing exchanges between producers and consumers more personal and that can still reduce the sense of objectification (feeling like a number or object) or estrangement (feeling disconnected) from the producer. This reduced sense of objectification or estrangement should affect consumer preferences and satisfaction, their willingness to pay, and even several types of post-purchase behaviors (see Fig. 1 for a graphical illustration). The goals of this paper are therefore to highlight ways in which feelings of alienation arise in the marketplace and ways to reduce those feelings of alienation.

We note again that whereas technology has often served to make alienation worse, it can also be part of the solution. For example, advanced tracking technology in food distribution channels make it increasingly possible for retailers and channel members to connect consumers directly to personal information about producers. Swiss retail giant Migros and Belgium's Coöperatie Hoogstraten (<https://www.hoogstraten.eu/en/>) include producer codes for individual producers of, respectively, eggs and strawberries on each container that link to a page introducing the person who produced the contents of that container. Domino's Pizza Tracker website automatically shows customers the name of the person who is making their pizza and allows consumers to leave comments directly for the pizza maker. Beyond the context of large corporations, the cooperative of coffee farmers in Andradas, a town in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, is currently filming clips with small-hold coffee farmers in the hope of convincing retailers in far-away countries to add QR codes to their retail environment and bring the farmers' personal sto-

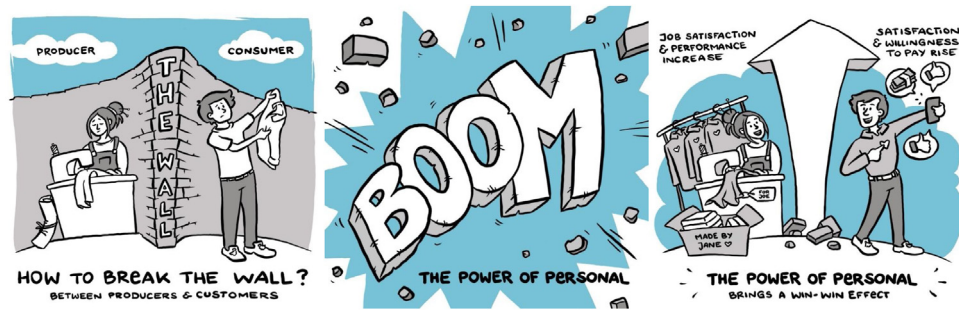


Fig. 1. Graphical illustration of the power of personal.

ries to consumers' smartphones. Thus, whereas technology has often been used to alienate and objectify producers and consumers, it can also be the key to making business more personal again.

In sum, we contribute to retailing theory by highlighting the role that alienation can play in reducing the meaning and satisfaction that is derived from marketing exchanges by both consumers and producers. We also contribute to marketing theory and practice by proposing a framework for understanding how reducing the alienation between consumers and producers can result in positive outcomes for the customer as well as the producer. Finally, we contribute to the topic of this *Journal of Retailing* special issue, on "Retail Experiences and the Consumer Journey" as most of the interventions we outline in this article impact directly on the retail experience. For example, we describe how elements of the retail experience such as providing more information about either the producer or consumer in an on-line or brick 'n mortar store can change outcomes such as consumer choice or willingness-to-pay. Furthermore, we highlight the important role of socio-emotional concerns such as alienation and objectification during the pre-consumption stages of the consumer journey, which have traditionally been studied from a highly individual and cognitive perspective. The journey of buying a product is not just about gathering information to buy the product that provides the highest consumption utility at the lowest cost. The journey of buying a product is also a process in which consumers create meaning by connecting with producers and thereby affirming themselves and their producer counterparts as a person.

In the first part of this paper, we elaborate on the notion of alienation as it applies to marketing exchanges, rooting our ideas in classic writing in political science, philosophy and sociology, and reviewing the role played by retailing in this process. In the second part of the paper, we present our framework of the "power of personal". We review findings and provide insights about how providing personal information about (a) the consumer to the producer and (b) the producer to the consumer can increase work satisfaction and product quality. Next we discuss how providing personal information about (c) the consumer to the producer and (d) the producer to the consumer can increase consumer satisfaction, preferences, and willingness-to-pay. Fig. 2 summarizes our framework and provides some concrete examples. In the concluding section of the paper, we highlight key managerial takeaways and opportunities for further research.

Worker Alienation and Objectification

Marx, Alienation, and Human Production

As mentioned in the introduction, to us, one of the most important legacies of Karl Marx's work is his theory of alienation, which describes how capitalist societies dehumanize workers by depriving them of meaning from, and control over, the outcome of their labor. Marx's theorizing does not in fact amount to a single, neat and clear theory, but more to an extensive body of work developed over many years and building on the Young Hegelian philosophical tradition (Feuerbach, Stirner, and others). Marx's theory of alienation was an important contribution to our understanding of how social relations and the meaning of work changed following the industrial revolution. In Marx's theory, a key source of alienation is the division of labor in industrial production. On the assembly line, workers are assigned limited, endlessly repetitive tasks far removed from the finished product and from the consumer, for the purpose of increasing operational efficiency. This mode of production takes away much of the meaning and pride the worker may have been able to find in her work. To give a concrete example, imagine an independent brewer producing the best beer that she can make and selling it to customers. A major source of her work satisfaction comes from the appreciation and happiness that the fruits of her labor bring to customers ("seeing consumers enjoy the beer she brewed"). Imagine the same person working on a beer production line for a company selling beer through a network of intermediaries. Her job now consists of following a repetitive and precisely specified plan. She is far removed from the final product and even further removed from the moment when a customer will finally enjoy the product. This worker is no longer making beer that people will enjoy, she is now merely selling labor as an employee to the employer. The worker is now alienated from her work, the products that result from it, and the consumers that will consume them.

In his "Comment on James Mill," Karl Marx (1844) zooms in on what it is that alienated workers are deprived of. He notes two core aspects of what it is like to produce "as a human being." The first aspect is about self-expression. A producer who produces as a human being shows and affirms herself in her product as a unique individual and a "power beyond all doubt." The second aspect is an element of usefulness to another person. That is, Marx argues that a producer producing as a human being derives

Personizing Information about Producer Consumer

Personizing Effects on	Producer	Illustrative example: Signing one’s work increases work satisfaction Relevant research: Ariely et al. (2007), Chadi et al. (2016), Kaiser et al. (2019), Kettle and Häubl (2011)	Illustrative example: A photo of the patient improves a radiologist’s performance Relevant research: Buell et al. (2016), Grant et al. (2007), Haque and Waytz (2012), Maira et al. (2018), Turner and Hadas-Halpern (2008)
	Consumer	Illustrative example: Knowing who made the soap increases willingness-to-pay Relevant research: Buell et al. (2016), Fuchs et al. (2019), Garrity and Degelman (1990), Jenni and Loewenstein (1997), Simmel (1903)	Illustrative example: Being called by name when retrieving a coffee stimulates repeat purchase Relevant research: Jenni and Lowenstein (1997), Kerin (1974), Kogut and Ritov (2005), Lim et al. (2019), Surprenant and Solomon (1987)

Fig. 2. The power of personal.

meaning, satisfaction, and joy from knowing that she produced something that is directly useful to another person.

Modern Alienation

Whereas Marx’s language and focus on manufacturing show the age of his work, his core insights about alienation are very timely. The current global economic system, with its complex supply and distribution chains, often robs producers of the possibility to fulfil self-expressive motives and to feel the satisfaction of making something that is useful to another person. Producers are often farther removed from consumers than ever, both in terms of steps in the production process and in terms of physical and psychological distance. There is very little connection between the worker sewing jeans in Bangladesh and the consumer trying them on in Vienna, Rotterdam, Munich, or Ithaca.

Alienation today is becoming a more relevant concern also because retailing technology has started to allow alienation beyond farming and manufacturing. To increase efficiency, services are increasingly delivered in ways that separate producers from consumers. For example, consumers no longer need to talk to a person on the phone to order a pizza. They can order the pizza online. We check in and out of hotels electronically. And even academics studying human behavior no longer meet their study participants in a lab. Instead, they run their experiments on online labor markets such as Amazon’s MTurk. In addition, the increasing availability of Artificial Intelligence solutions in retail and customer service means that even fairly complex social interactions will in the future likely be performed by algorithms, not employees, further increasing the distance between workers and

consumers (Puntoni et al. 2019). While in many contexts producers and consumers accept and even prefer this separation, there are more and more contexts where modern producers condemn this separation and seek contact with consumers. For example, interviews with producers who sell products on the online platform Etsy revealed that some producers derive more value from being in personal contact with customers than from making money. This phenomenon is consistent with general changes in people’s value systems, where people derive increasingly less value from material possession but more from self-expression, belongingness, and interpersonal relationships (Inglehart 1997). Trend watchers and employers increasingly observe that Millennial or Gen Z recruits demand more than money. They want meaning and control. To quote one of our colleagues, Edward McLaughlin, undergraduates no longer walk into our offices asking how they can earn their first million before they are 25. They still want a good job that pays the bills, but they also want that job to be useful to other people and to allow them to express themselves. Similarly, more and more producers decide to make products by hand, under their own control, that allow them to put something of themselves in their products and sell them directly to consumers on platforms such as Etsy. The handmade, hipster, and indie movements all epitomize this evolution and even large-scale companies try to co-opt some of its elements through advertising and “fake indie” brands.

Research in consumer behavior and marketing has started to examine how product cues that underline the presence of people behind the product can help generate consumer demand. Production cues can increase consumer interest when they suggest that meaningful work was involved in making the product. For example, handmade cues make products more attractive because

consumers perceive handmade products as having being produced with more passion and love than machine-made products (Fuchs, Schreier, and van Osselaer 2015). Even minimal cues that draw attention to possible human involvement in production can increase consumer interest. For example, handwritten typeface on packaging produces more positive consumer responses by suggesting human involvement in production: “handwritten typefaces endow [products] with a sense of human contact, warmth, and sensitivity” (Schroll, Schnurr, and Grewal 2018, p. 649).

The Psychology of Worker Alienation

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, research on Marx’s theory of alienation has centered on fields such as philosophy, political economy, and sociology. More recently, research in psychology and behavioral economics has started to corroborate some of the core elements and assumptions of Marx’s theory. For example, although focused more on close personal ties than on the less intimate connections between producers and consumers (even in non-alienating contexts), researchers now recognize humans’ fundamental need to belong and to feel connected to other people as an important driver of behavior and happiness (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Researchers also recognize that human workers do not gain happiness if they serve as mere cogs in the production process, and that meaning in production is essential for producers’ work satisfaction and motivation (e.g., Cummings and Manring 1977; Haque 2011; Kanungo 1979). Specifically, behavioral economists and management scholars have started studying the relevance of “meaning” in the production of goods (Michaelson et al. 2014; Grant et al. 2007; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010). For example, Ariely, Kamenica, and Prelec (2008) asked participants in a lab experiment to assemble Lego Bionicle kits for monetary compensation. In one condition, which they termed the *Sisyphus* condition, the experimenter disassembled the Bionicle before the participant could build it again using the same pieces. In the *Meaningful* condition, the participant placed each completed Bionicle on the desk before she could build another one using a new box of pieces. Participants built 47% more Bionicles despite receiving only 25% more money to do so. In a related field experiment, Chadi, Jeworrek, and Mertins (2016) found that meaningless work affects subsequent work effort and performance. For example, when workers are informed that a job already done was meaningless, they put less effort in subsequent tasks. Moreover, the retailing literature has long emphasized the potential for performance-lowering stress among frontline employees (Babin and Boles 1996). This literature has documented the importance of intrinsic motivation and job meaningfulness as a buffer against work-related stress (e.g., Coelho, Augusto, and Lages 2011). At the same time, employee survey after employee survey point to widespread disengagement and alienation in the workplace (e.g., Gallup 2019). In sum, modern research in psychology, marketing, and behavioral economics has started to document the need for social connection and the need for meaningful work that is left unfulfilled by alienating industrial production.

Objectification of Producers

In his letter to James Mill, Marx (1844) contrasts industrial production with production as a human being. His writing might be taken to suggest that industrial, alienating, and less meaningful production gives producers a sense of being less than human. Thus, it seems possible that workers feel dehumanized and, more specifically, objectified. Writing mostly in the context of the objectification of women, Nussbaum (1995) describes objectification in terms of seven characteristics: (1) Instrumentality, or the objectifier using a person as a tool for the objectifier’s purposes; (2) Denial of Autonomy, or the objectifier treating a person as lacking autonomy and self-determination; (3) Inertness, or the objectifier treating a person as lacking in agency and even in activity; (4) Fungibility, or interchangeability with other objects; (5) Violability, or the objectifier treating a person as something that is permissible to harm; (6) Ownership, or the objectifier treating a person as something that can be bought or sold; and (7) Denial of Subjectivity, or the objectifier treating a person “as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not to be taken into account” (p. 257). Although not all of these are equally relevant or equally intense in the context of producer alienation, several of these behaviors do seem to apply. In effect, modern corporate approaches to personnel management often seem explicitly designed to objectify workers or, in common parlance, “human resources”.

Consequences of Producer Alienation and Objectification for Producers

The thesis here is that producers’ feelings of alienation from the consumer and of objectification hurts producers: it decreases the meaningfulness of their work and reduces work satisfaction and motivation, which, in turn, is likely to reduce work performance. Of course, the more optimistic flipside of this is that anything that can be done to reduce feelings of alienation from the consumer and of being objectified should increase work satisfaction, motivation, and the quality and/or quantity of the work.

Effects of Personalizing on the Producer

We argue that making producers or consumers personal – making salient the person behind the transaction – can have positive effects on producers. We use the term personalizing to express the idea of making a consumer see a producer, or the producer see the consumer, as an individual person rather than an anonymous entity. We believe the term personalizing to be preferable to the term “personalizing” because the latter can be seen to refer to customization of the product to the customer’s needs or preferences (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010), whereas what we wish to refer to is not about the product per se but about the person who makes or consumes it. We also believe personalizing is a better term than “personifying” (Haque and Waytz 2012, p. 180) because personification can refer to making person-like something that is not a person, whereas personalizing is about making person-like someone who is actually a person. We also

prefer using personizing to “humanization” because humanization contrasts with dehumanization which sometimes signifies treating a human being as an infra-human animal (Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson 1975; Haslam and Loughnan 2014), whereas personizing contrasts with treating a human being as an instrument or object, sometimes referred to as “mechanistic dehumanization” (Haslam 2006).

Personizing the Producer to the Consumer

One way to reduce a producer’s alienation from the consumer, and hence potentially increase job satisfaction, motivation, and the quality of the work, would be to personize the producer to the consumer. If producers feel objectified, treated as a number, an interchangeable tool, unable to express their individuality in their work, instead of someone who shows and affirms herself in her product as a unique individual and a “power beyond all doubt,” one remedy might be to allow the consumer to see or even get to know the producer. This can take the shape of real, face-to-face interaction based on direct two-way communication. If consumers talk to producers, the producer is no longer anonymous, allowing the producer to express herself as an individual. Thus, in addition to making work more meaningful by allowing the producer to see the usefulness of her work for another person, personal interaction can also make work more meaningful by allowing the producer to express herself as an individual. It would be interesting to document this additional path and to see when and how each path (usefulness to another person vs. self-expression) is stronger or weaker.

One open and important question here is whether personizing interventions that do not go as far as direct, two-way, personal interaction, would be effective. For example it is not clear whether process transparency, that is, allowing consumers to see workers producing the product, would be sufficient to increase the quality of producers’ work as well as their work satisfaction. Research by Buell, Kim, and Tsay (2016) that manipulated process transparency in a university cafeteria did not find a main effect on food quality as perceived by consumers (but did find a positive interaction effect between process and customer transparency, i.e., the producer’s ability to see the consumer). Thus, the jury is still out on what level of contact or information is necessary to produce beneficial effects of personizing the producer on the producer and her production.

Beyond encouraging interaction or observation of the production process, de-objectification and self-expression might potentially also be achieved in a simpler way. As evidenced by its importance in religious ceremonies across the globe, one thing that helps us to become a distinctive individual, with autonomy but within a community, is our name.² Within the consumer behavior domain, Kettle and Häubl (2011) document that signing one’s name activates one’s self-identity. It seems possible

that the simplest of interventions, asking producers to sign their name on their products, might allow producers to self-express and reduce feelings of being objectified, which in turn could increase work satisfaction as well as the quality of the work. In collaboration with the MAK Museum in Vienna, Kaiser et al. (2019) set up a “live lab” in the museum as integral part of a temporary exhibit on hand-made production. In one of the studies run during the holiday season, visitors were asked to assemble and decorate paper Christmas angels for display at the Museum and to either sign their work or not. Participants were found to produce higher quality work and were more satisfied with their production experience when they signed their work. We feel that this research is promising because simply signing one’s name on the product may often be a cost-efficient way to increase worker satisfaction and product quality at the same time. This could be a win-win-win for workers, customers, and employers.

Of course, many other open questions remain, such as whether the effect replicates with professional producers producing the same product over and over again, what other processes such as accountability might amplify or detract from the self-expression effect, and what the moderators and boundary conditions of the signature effect could be. For example, it is not clear whether the observed effect is limited to individual artisans creating a one-of-a-kind piece of art, or whether the effect generalizes to an employee in a pizza delivery chain making one pie after another in a highly scripted environment. (Given the low cost of the intervention, we see no reason why the pizza chain should not try.) The effect of personizing the producer to the customer may depend on individual differences between producers. For example, a person who already feels validated and already derives a lot of meaning from their work without being identified to the customer might not show a substantial effect of such personization. Workers who value their privacy or are particularly shy might also not value being “outed.” It is unclear if the effect might be moderated by characteristics such as low self-esteem. One could imagine that workers with low self-esteem, who feel deprived of positive reinforcement and recognition, might respond very well to personization. One could equally imagine that such workers might feel vulnerable to negative feedback and even ridicule if they put their name or personal information “out there.” It is also unclear whether personization is more effective among producers with few social contacts, or producers who feel lonely or socially isolated than among producers with many social contacts who might be socially saturated. One could imagine that this is possible but it is unclear whether personizing alone is strong enough to overcome people’s feelings of being isolated. Another question might be to what extent a company’s brand name might have the same effect as an individual producer’s signature. We expect that a corporate brand is unlikely to provide the same level of psychological benefit to the individual worker as their individual signature would. The corporate brand represents many more people and tends to be controlled by managers rather than direct producers, so the effect would probably be highly diluted.

² Some of us fondly remember the baptism ceremonies of our children, in which sentences such as “Parents, when you give your child a name, you really say: We as parents give you this name, but you are not our possession: We do not own you, but you yourself are your own person.” are common

Personizing the Consumer to the Producer

In addition to personizing the producer to the consumer, another way to reduce a producer's alienation from the consumer, and hence potentially increase job satisfaction, motivation, and the quality of the work, would be to personalize the consumer, that is, provide personal information about the consumer that makes it easier for the producer to see that they are producing for a real, other person. Initial evidence from the medical field suggests that this might work. For example, [Turner and Hadas-Halpern \(2008\)](#) report a study indicating that providing radiologists with a picture of the patient whose scan they are examining, increases the accuracy of their diagnoses. Based on these findings, [Haque and Waytz \(2012\)](#) recommend that doctors when discussing patients, instead of referring to patients by numbers, start their discussion by a single-sentence personal description of the patient (e.g., including their name, hometown, family status, and/or profession). We argue that similar interventions might work for consumer products and services. For example, if customers were encouraged to upload a picture, their name, and some personal information to their bank or utility provider, (remote) retail bankers or utility billers or repair people should feel more job satisfaction, recommend more appropriate financial products, resolve billing issues more quickly with fewer errors, or restore utility service more promptly. A similar approach might work well on online platforms such as Etsy and even in more industrial production settings such as the small- and medium-scale manufacturing of furniture, chicken coops, or backyard sheds. In addition to the customer actively providing information, other interventions that bring producers in contact with consumers, such as having the person who produced a product (e.g., a piece of furniture or a backyard shed) also do the delivery or personally instruct the user on how to use or take care of the product might have similar effects on work satisfaction and work quality. In a charity context, for example, [Grant et al. \(2007\)](#) showed that callers at a university fundraising unit spent 142% more time on solicitation calls and raised 171% more money when they met and interacted with a beneficiary of the undergraduate scholarships funded by their work. Although this research provides at least some indication that personizing the consumer to the producer might increase the quality and amount of work done while increasing job satisfaction (a win-win-win for employee, customer, and employer), research in the context of commercial relationships rather than medical, educational, or charity contexts is still exceedingly rare. We only have anecdotal evidence. For example, the curator of an exhibition on handmade products in Vienna relayed to us that she spoke to two Austrian furniture makers who consider it essential to their job satisfaction to hand-deliver their tables to their customers, even when they have to travel abroad to do it. One of us once ordered online an herb box for the garden and was surprised when the person who cut and prepared the wooden structure showed up to install it. Talking to the producer, it was instantly clear how much more meaningful his job was made by the possibility of visiting customers and see the fruit of his efforts in situ.

Research is needed to explore the effects of personizing the consumer on producer work satisfaction, work motivation, and

on work quality. It would be important to know whether, and when, making customers personal increases work motivation and satisfaction, and whether the quality of products increases when producers know for whom they are producing. To answer some of these research questions, [Maira et al. \(2018\)](#) conducted some initial experiments in which, for example, they paid online workers (MTurkers) to draw and upload a birthday card for a 6-year old girl. They found that paying these workers to produce cards for a 6-year old girl who is identified by name and some other personal information yields significantly higher quality birthday cards than for paying the same amount of money to a different set of workers to produce a birthday card for an anonymous 6-year old girl (although the latter cards also turned out to be surprisingly good, perhaps because even making a card for an anonymous 6-year old girl is much less alienating and much more meaningful than most of the work MTurkers are asked to do).

Beyond starting to document the main effect, we know very little at present about moderators and boundary conditions. For example, producers may differ in terms of their need to feel they are contributing meaningfully to customers' lives. For example, it is not clear if the positive effect is smaller or larger to the extent that the producers' more basic needs are satisfied. On the one hand, from a hierarchy of needs perspective ([Maslow 1943](#)) one might expect that the need for meaning would be weaker when more pressing basic needs such as food, shelter, and basic possessions are not yet satisfied. On the other hand, if economic benefits are small, socio-emotional benefits might loom extra large in comparison and become a source of dignity especially when producers toil in relative poverty. Another potential moderator is the similarity and physical or psychological distance between producer and consumer. For example, it seems possible the effect of personizing the consumer on product quality and work satisfaction might be more positive as the consumer is physically or psychologically closer. In fact, in one study ([Maira et al. 2018](#)), we found evidence that this the case; participants experienced more work satisfaction when they felt that the personalized recipient was similar to them; this was not the case, however, when the personalized recipient was dissimilar. In the extreme, it seems possible that the effect could become negative. For example, might providing information about racial or ethnic identity of customers lead producers to exhibit bias and make lower quality products? Might there be other elements of personal information that could reverse the positive effect? It seems entirely possible that providing personal information to producers could lead producers to discriminate against consumers. Providing personal information might also allow producers to violate the consumers' privacy (see, also [Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004](#)). Yet another question is whether, or at what point, producers start seeing this type of personization as a gimmick meant to manipulate workers into doing more or better work for the same or less money. This seems to be a threat particularly in situations in which the provision of consumer information is driven by corporate authorities rather than by the workers themselves. Even within larger corporations, the extent to which workers may dismiss this form of personization as manipulative likely depends on the authenticity of a brand's customer- and worker-centric

ethos. If workers perceive the company to really care about its customers and really care about doing meaningful work, we predict that providing customer information is unlikely to backfire. Finally, we would be interested to see if the positive effect of providing customer information on producers depends on the level of autonomy of the producer and the extent to which the producer performs the whole production function or only performs one or few steps in a production process. Does the high level of alienation in a production line make customer information more impactful because any small bit of meaning looms large, or does the division of the production among many workers just dilute the effect of providing customer information?

Effects of Personalizing on the Consumer

Like producers, who feel alienated from the consumers who use their products and feel objectified as tools in the hands of employers, we propose that consumers also feel alienated from producers and feel objectified as mere tools for profit. As speculated in [Campbell \(2005, p. 25\)](#): “if large-scale factory-based machine production was an essentially alienating experience for those involved, then it would seem to follow that the consumption of commodities produced in this way must be similarly alienating.” Since the industrial revolution and increasingly today, consumers no longer “shake the hand that feeds [them]” ([Pollan 2007](#)), or the hand that made the t-shirt they wear, or even the hand that processes their to-be-deposited check at a retail bank. Consistent with ample literature in Marketing suggesting that actual, two-way communication and relationship-building between producers and consumers can have beneficial effects on consumers (e.g., [Price and Arnould 1999](#); [Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007](#)), we believe that consuming a product or service loses some of its meaning if it is not embedded in a network of social relationships. However, we propose that in order to obtain some of those benefits, actual, two-way interaction may not be necessary. Some of the beneficial effects may be obtained through pseudo-social, one-way communication that does not involve physical contact between producers and consumers. We predict that consumers feel more grounded and more secure when they merely receive information about the person who made the product they consume, or if that producer receives information about them. We also propose that these types of information can make consumers feel more valued as a person rather than as an anonymous source of profit ready to be taken advantage of. Without these (pseudo-)connections, consumption becomes emptily materialistic and gratuitous to some extent. We propose that restoring these connections, or even just providing information that makes consumption less anonymous, can have significant benefits for consumers, producers, companies, and the environment.

Personalizing the Producer to the Consumer

Surprisingly, we found no research that has looked empirically at what it does to a consumer to know who made the products they buy. [Buell, Kim, and Tsay \(2016\)](#) showed that allowing consumers to see workers produce their food increased

consumers’ perceptions of service value, but in some cases the effect only materialized when the workers could also see the consumers. In addition, in these process transparency experiments it was not clear whether this effect was due to consumers learning about the producers or about the production process. Research on the identifiable victim effect (e.g., [Jenni and Loewenstein 1997](#); [Kogut and Ritov 2005](#); [Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic 2007](#)) is also indicative that providing information about a person can have beneficial consequences, but the context of charity donations is of course very different from most consumer purchasing situations. The lack of research on personalizing the producer and its impact on consumers stands in stark contrast with the burgeoning trend among companies to communicate about the workers who make the products we buy. Online sellers of handcrafted goods, such as Novica, Emilime, Mormor, and Etsy, frequently display background information about the producers who make the products. But increasingly, larger-scale operations have joined the bandwagon too. Hertog Jan beer, part of the largest beer company in the world, Anheuser–Busch InBev, introduces its brewers to Dutch consumers in national TV ads. It is also common for supermarkets such as Wegmans in the Northeastern United States to introduce the farmers who supply their stores in their magazines, websites, and in-store. On every item it sells, Lush cosmetics shows the name and a picture of the person who made the item. Similar strategies can be seen in service contexts. For instance, Domino’s gives us the name of person making our pizza when we order online and in high-end restaurants the chef often leaves the kitchen to visit the tables and talk directly to the customers who eat the food. [Garrity and Degelman \(1990\)](#) found that when a waitress introduced herself by name, consumers tipped over 50% more than when she remained anonymous. These practices can be seen as an effort to personalize the producer to the consumer, presumably to increase customer satisfaction and the perceived value of the experience. Finally, one of the drivers behind the success of “sharing economy” companies such as AirBnB might be that their business model encourages consumers to get to know the “producers” of the services (e.g., their hosts).

Initial research has started investigating the effect of providing personal information about the producer on consumers’ preferences and willingness-to-pay, trying to gauge its size, underlying processes, and boundary conditions. For example, using a consumer panel, [Fuchs et al. \(2019\)](#) collaborated with an Austrian cookie manufacturer to see how much more consumers would be willing to pay extra when they received some personal information (such as hobbies and activities outside work) about the producer, Sebastian. Using an incentive-compatible willingness-to-pay task, they found that the panel members were willing to pay substantially more for a selection of cookies when consumers learned about Sebastian than when they did not. In another experiment, the authors also found that consumers felt that cookies tasted better when they had received some background information about the producer. Thus, personalizing the producer seems to have positive utility for consumers, making the product more attractive and improving their consumption experience. For the producer (or their employer), additional product interest and willingness to pay directly boost financial

profit, because the increased sales and willingness to pay are obtained at virtually zero cost.

Many questions remain unanswered, however, as we do not have a good understanding yet of boundary conditions and moderators of the effect of providing background information about producers. One question we have been asked before is whether this effect is limited to hedonic, as opposed to utilitarian products. We believe this is unlikely to be the case. We see no reason why, for example, consumers would not feel a meaningful connection to the maker of a Gränsfors axe who pressed his initials into the steel of the axe or why that would not increase consumers' willingness to buy, or willingness to pay for, this very utilitarian object. It does seem possible that the effect might be moderated by the importance of the type of product to the consumer. For example, the initials on the Gränsfors axe might make a larger difference to the extent that the consumer cares more about forestry and uses an axe more frequently. The effect might also be smaller for more disposable items such as a coffee stirring stick. We may not be willing to pay more if we know who made that stirrer. Individual differences on the customer or producer side may moderate the effect of producer personalization on customer demand. For example, consumers who are more lonely and less embedded in a web of satisfying social relationships might be more prone to the effect. Although we find that the effect persists if the producer is described as a not very likeable "witch in the woods," the effect may be larger to the extent that the producer is seen as more attractive, likeable, or special, and may even reverse due to discrimination. For example, minority producers or other stigmatized groups may be hurt by the provision of personal information.

We are also interested to find out if there are any downstream consequences of personalizing the producer. Would you be less or more likely to gobble up the pack of cookies in one sitting if you knew they were made by Sebastian? Would you take better care of your hand-knitted hat if you knew your hat was knitted by Susan Barnes, who lives in a wooden house near Boston, has two kids, and who likes to ski but is not very good at it? Would you be reluctant to sell a seldomly-used Gränsfors axe that has the initials of its producer pressed into the steel versus keep it to pass it on to your offspring? And would you have the product repaired or throw it away when the handle breaks? We know from recent work by [Trudel, Argo, and Meng \(2016\)](#) that consumers are less likely to trash, and more likely to recycle, products that bear their own name, so it is not impossible that they would do the same for products that bear the name of the producer.

A final issue that merits discussion here is the relationship between information about an individual producer and the product's brand name. Whereas brands probably do not provide the same benefit as a worker's name or signature, we do believe that individual producers may in some situations become their own brands. It seems possible that customers attribute quality to the individual producer and form their emotional connections with the individual producer rather than the corporate brand, much like a sub-brand can compete with a corporate brand ([Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2000](#)). That is, there may be a risk of the individual producer becoming the "brand" and thereby

controlling the relationship with the customer at the expense of the corporate brand. Of course, this risk should be limited mostly to situations in which customers can easily repurchase from the same individual producer. If customers do not repurchase or cannot choose the producer for their subsequent purchases, brand appropriation by the producer will be much less problematic. We would also like to note that even if the producer becomes a brand and that brand competes to some extent with the corporate brand, the extra motivation for the producer and the extra demand from the customer may be well worth that cost.

Personalizing the Consumer to the Producer

If the anonymity of many market exchanges makes consumers feel alienated from producers and feel objectified as mere tools for profit, we should also find that providing personal information about the consumer to the producer should reduce consumers' feelings of being treated like interchangeable objects and make them feel more positive about a product or service. There are some indications that this might indeed be the case. For example, [Kerin \(1974\)](#) documented that addressing people personally (by name) increases response rates. [Surprenant and Solomon \(1987\)](#) showed that when service providers used customers' names instead of impersonal pronouns when they interacted with them, and actively solicited their opinions and reactions to offerings, consumers evaluated the service employee and the company more positively. In the retail industry, more and more companies have started to process and call out orders identifying consumers by their first name rather than by order number or order type. For example, at Starbucks baristas ask for a customer's name and write that name (or something that sounds like it) on the customer's cup. Although originally motivated by reduced confusion when using names rather than numbers in a noisy environment, it seems possible that this practice increases consumer satisfaction by making consumers feel less objectified.

The de-objectification process due to asking a customer's name, and to our surprise, even the core positive effect of this practice on consumers' service evaluations, seems not to have been tested in the literature (in a way that is not confounded with soliciting of opinions and reactions). In an ongoing research effort, [Lim et al. \(2019\)](#) have started to empirically explore both the effect on service evaluations and the underlying process. For example, in a field study at two coffee shops on a university campus, they found that calling out orders by name rather than number increased customers' service evaluations. This beneficial effect was found to be mediated by customers' reduced feelings of objectification. Thus, there does seem to be a "Starbucks effect" and the effect seems to be driven, at least in part, by consumers feeling they are treated less like an interchangeable object.

These authors have also started to look at moderators, such as individual differences in the need for de-objectification and perceptions of threat to privacy. They find that asking for a consumer's name can backfire for consumers who care less for de-objectification and more for privacy. In addition, they also show that the effect reverses when the producer is a robot or when the product is of an embarrassing nature (e.g., a test for

a sexually transmitted disease). Interestingly, they also find that the effect was not strengthened when the retailer who makes the product asks for more information than just the first name. There may be differences between product categories in terms of the effect of asking information beyond the first name. For more customizable, expensive, and durable goods, such as hand-made furniture or the services of an architect, it may be much more acceptable and even beneficial to ask for more information about a consumer than for simpler, smaller, and more standardized products such as a drink at Starbucks.

Discussion

Since the time of the industrial revolution, and even more strongly during the current digital revolution, mass-production, globalization, and technological innovation have brought many benefits. For example, the ubiquitous deployment of interactive in-store technology such as smartphone apps, touchscreen terminals, and increasingly augmented reality and robots, as well as the continuing increase of online shopping have brought efficiency and convenience, and have made shopping “smart”, and potentially “fun” (e.g., Bradlow et al. 2017; Grewal, Roggeveen, and Nordfält 2017; Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman 2015). We argue, however, that through these same revolutions, producers and consumers are increasingly alienated from each other and feel increasingly objectified, that is, treated as mere interchangeable sources of profit. We believe the lack of human connection to the people who make the products we consume and to the people who utilize the products we make reduces the meaning we find in consumption and production. Simple interventions, often easily implementable at virtually zero cost and sometimes afforded by the same technology that also increases alienation, can be used to *reduce* the alienation between producers and consumers with positive consequences for both (and for the producer’s company, creating a win-win-win). For example, initial evidence from our research group suggests that (1) personalizing consumers by giving some personal information about them to the producer can increase product quality (Maira et al. 2018), (2) personalizing producers by simply having them sign their name on the products they produce can increase both product quality and job satisfaction (Kaiser et al. 2019), (3) personalizing producers by providing some personal information about them to consumers yields increased consumer preference and willingness-to-pay for the producers’ products (Fuchs et al. 2019), and (4) personalizing consumers by providing their name to producers increases consumers’ service satisfaction (Lim et al. 2019).

Additional Avenues for Future Research

In the preceding sections, for each of the cells of our framework (see Fig. 2), we discussed specific future research opportunities that we hope retail and marketing researchers will pursue with an aim to better understand our suggested personalizing treatments. In addition, there are several other avenues for further research that we think are promising which we review hereafter.

Implications for the retail and service industries

First, our analysis calls for research on (a) how retailing can foster or reduce feelings of alienation among consumers and (b) what interventions could be deployed to personalize consumers and workers in a retail environment. The retailing literature has long established the complexity of the consumers’ shopping motivations (e.g., Arnold and Reynolds 2003). Future research should explore the role of consumers’ (and employees’) desire to reduce marketplace alienation in a retailing context.

In this paper we focused on the disclosure of personal information about consumers and producers, that is, employees or self-employed workers who make physical products. One might wonder to what extent our insights can be applied to retail workers who do not produce the products but sell them. Companies increasingly also provide personal information about their retail workers and sales personnel, such as prominent names tags in electronics stores or employee-curated selections in bookstores. We speculate that this might be particularly useful when there is no physical contact between consumers and retail workers such as in online retailing. In fact in such a context, personalizing retail workers could help increase trust on the part of consumers (e.g., Gefen and Straub 2004). This may go beyond actual producers, as some retailers endow their chatbots with human features (consider, e.g., Anna, IKEA’s virtual assistant).

Another important research question pertains to the role of personalizing in non-retail service contexts where the service provider is unseen by the consumer. For example, in some hotels cleaning personnel leave signed notes for customers. We speculate that such interventions are likely to increase the feeling of being served and increase customers’ appreciation of the work of the cleaning personnel. This may be especially the case in situations where workers can easily be dehumanized and exploited, such as workers in low-status jobs like cleaning, and where customers receive the personal note when they are alone in a private space, such as a hotel room or a car. In addition, personalizing service staff to the customer might have additional benefits. It seems possible that, for example, customers could be more likely to heed appeals for water-saving towel reuse (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008) or other prosocial messages when such appeals are made in a more personal manner by the person who cleaned the room.

Ethical behavior

Personalizing the consumer might decrease unethical behavior by companies and their employees. Commentators and social scientists have repeatedly pointed out the dangers of allowing a large distance between a worker’s actions and those actions’ repercussions for customers and society at large. One of the main findings in moral psychology is that ethical decision making is more difficult when the consequences of one’s actions are farther removed. For example, although disputed (e.g., Blass 1991), in one of the most often discussed variations in Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments on obedience to authority it was easier for people to dispense electric shocks when they were physically farther away from their “victim” (Milgram 1974). The lack of accountability bred by a large distance between workers and the consequences of their actions is often mentioned

as a root causes of negative externalities created by business, from financial crises to environmental damage. We would argue that the effect of “distance” between perpetrators and victims of unethical behavior may not merely be caused by the reduction in accountability, but also by the personal alienation it entails. Merely personizing consumers and other people impacted by one’s decisions may decrease the likelihood of unethical behavior even when accountability is kept constant.

Beyond disclosure of personal information

In addition to providing information about producers to consumers and about consumers to producers, the management literature suggests there might be other ways in which companies can help reduce feelings of alienation among producers. For example, companies could institute mindfulness courses for employees or establish programs to strengthen affiliative feelings among workers in a production team or unit. This may help producers feel more embedded and purposeful. Common corporate initiatives like a requirement for managers to spend one day per year on the shop floor might also produce unrecognized side benefits by introducing the beneficiaries of the companies’ efforts to workers far removed from frontline service. For consumers, companies could develop programs to strengthen brand communities and leverage the potential of peer-to-peer interactions for making consumption more meaningful. For example, user communities likely reduce feelings of alienation by offering people the opportunity to provide advice and support to other users.

More generally, it is possible that just knowing where a product was made or exactly how a product was made also helps reduce feelings of alienation. This might explain some of the success of so-called “indie” or “hipster” products and local products. These products are made (or pretend to be made) in a specific location, on a small scale, with more transparent and less mechanized processes, by one or a few specific people. Research has started to investigate what attracts consumers to such indie products (Eichinger et al., 2019). In a broader sense, this discussion is also relevant to the decision about how much a company should reveal or explain about the materials employed in production and the way the product is created. Greater transparency is often used as a way for high-quality producers to signal quality (“Made in Germany”, “24 carats”, etc.) and may also impact the transfer of brand essence (Newman and Dhar 2014). However, such transparency may also be a way to reduce alienation in consumption. To continue with food-related examples, in restaurant menus ingredients are nowadays often accompanied by provenance information (e.g., “pistachio from Bronte”) and it is possible that such information may be helpful not only as a quality cue but also as a way to ground the product in a concrete somewhere and reduce feelings of alienation.

The social customer journey

We hope the current work also helps to enrich our understanding of the customer decision journey. The dominant model of this journey, as inspired by scientists studying human decision making (cf., Puccinelli et al. 2009; Lemon and Verhoef 2016) and made popular by consultants at McKinsey (e.g., Edelman

2010), is inherently an individual and cognitive model. Although it acknowledges the influence of social, peer-to-peer sources of information, it in essence remains a model that assumes that an individual is trying to find the product with the highest consumption utility. The social element is mostly in information exchange between different parties as inputs into what remains an individual, self-centered decision. In this article, we join others in highlighting the fundamentally social nature of consumers’ actual decision journeys (Hamilton et al. 2019). We describe how consumption is driven not just by the utility of the product per se, but also by other criterion goals (cf. van Osselaer et al. 2005). Specifically, we argue that, throughout the customer decision journey, consumers are also trying to create meaning by connecting to the people who make the products. They may be more likely to consider products made by producers or retail personnel who are identified to them. They may put weight on being treated like a person when evaluating their options. And their “loyalty loop” may be driven by feeling they have a personal connection with the person making or selling the product or by that person acknowledging their individuality and human-ness. Thus, optimizing the customer journey might require giving consumers opportunity to be “seen,” as individual persons, and opportunity to derive meaning from getting to know the person(s) who make the products they are considering to buy. We hope others will join our initial efforts to more fully understand the power of personal.

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