

Autonomous products like robot vacuums make our lives easier. But do they deprive us of meaningful experiences?

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Researchers from University of St. Gallen and Columbia Business School published a new *Journal of Marketing* article that examines how the perceived meaning of manual labor can help predict the adoption of autonomous products.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is authored by

Emanuel de Bellis, Gita Venkataramani Johar, and Nicola Poletti.

Whether it is cleaning homes or mowing lawns, consumers increasingly delegate manual tasks to autonomous products. These gadgets operate without human oversight and free consumers from mundane chores. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that people feel a sense of satisfaction when they complete household chores. Are autonomous products such as robot vacuums and cooking machines depriving consumers from meaningful experiences?

This new research shows that, despite unquestionable benefits such as gains in efficiency and convenience, autonomous products strip away a source of meaning in life. As a result, consumers are hesitant to buy these products.

The researchers argue that manual labor is an important source of meaning in life. This is in line with research showing that [everyday tasks](#) have value—chores such as cleaning may not make us happy, but they add meaning to our lives.

As de Bellis explains, "Our studies show that 'meaning of manual labor' causes consumers to reject autonomous products. For example, these consumers have a more negative attitude toward autonomous products and are also more prone to believe in the disadvantages of autonomous products relative to their advantages."

Highlight saving time for other meaningful tasks

On one hand, autonomous products take over tasks from consumers, typically leading to a reduction in manual labor and hence in the ability to derive meaning from manual tasks. On the other hand, by taking over manual tasks, autonomous products provide consumers with the opportunity to spend time on other, potentially more meaningful, tasks

and activities.

"We suggest that companies highlight so-called alternative sources of meaning in life, which should reduce consumers' need to derive meaning specifically from manual tasks. Highlighting other sources of meaning, such as through family or hobbies, at the time of the adoption decision should counteract the negative effect on autonomous product adoption," says Johar.

In fact, a key value proposition for many of these technologies is that they free up time. iRobot claims that its robotic vacuum cleaner Roomba saves owners as much as 110 hours of cleaning a year. Some companies go even a step further by suggesting what consumers could do with their freed-up time.

For example, German home appliance company Vorwerk promotes its cooking machine Thermomix with "more family time" and "Thermomix does the work so you can make time for what matters most." Instead of promoting the quality of task completion (i.e., cooking a delicious meal), the company emphasizes that consumers can spend time on other, arguably more meaningful, activities.

This study demonstrates that the perceived meaning of manual labor (MML)—a novel concept introduced by the researchers—is key to predicting the adoption of autonomous products. Poletti says that "Consumers with a high MML tend to resist the delegation of manual tasks to autonomous products, irrespective of whether these tasks are central to one's identity or not. Marketers can start by segmenting consumers into high and low MML consumers."

Unlike other personality variables that can only be reliably measured using complex psychometric scales, the extent of consumers' MML might be assessed simply by observing their behavioral characteristics,

such as whether consumers tend to do the dishes by hand, whether they prefer a manual car transmission, or what type of activities and hobbies they pursue.

Activities like woodworking, cookery, painting, and fishing are likely predictors of high MML. Similarly, companies can measure likes on [social media](#) for specific activities and hobbies that involve manual labor. Finally, practitioners can ask consumers to rate the degree to which manual versus cognitive tasks are meaningful to them. Having segmented consumers according to their MML, marketers can better target and focus their messages and efforts.

In promotions, firms can highlight the meaningful time [consumers](#) gain with the use of autonomous products (e.g., "this product allows you to spend time on more meaningful tasks and pursuits than cleaning"). Such an intervention can prevent the detrimental effects of meaning of manual labor on autonomous product adoption.

More information: Emanuel de Bellis et al, EXPRESS: Meaning of Manual Labor Impedes Consumer Adoption of Autonomous Products, *Journal of Marketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429231171841](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429231171841)

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