UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CORE HUMAN NEEDS & CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Digging for 'Whys'

As a team of social scientists working in consumer research, KR&I strives to understand the 'what,' 'when,' 'where,' and 'how' of consumer behavior. Above all, though, we work to illuminate the 'why.' While 'what,' 'when,' 'where,' and 'how' may be essential for understanding the present, 'why' helps us plan for the future. When businesses understand why people do things, they can build new offerings, improve existing ones, and take responsibility for the role their products, services, experiences, and brands play in people's lives. 'Why' can be explored through

consumers' stated motivations, observed behavior, experiential context, and functional outcomes – or, ideally, a combination of all of these – and 'why' can be mined at multiple levels, from the tactical to the existential.

Through this process of digging for 'whys' – pushing past surface-level explanations, mixing qualitative, quantitative, direct, and observational methods, study after study, for a range of industries, over nearly fifteen years – we hit the bedrock of human nature.

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We had been conducting a year-long, multi-modal study of fans and fandom (known as "The Power of Fandom") to generate broad, foundational knowledge for entertainment industry clients.[1] Our methods included:

- Literature review across academic, industry, and editorial sources
- Six, six-week waves of mobile ethnography to understand everyday moments in which being a fan proved important, relevant, or meaningful in people's lives[2]
- Twelve months of continuous 'netnography' (an ethnographic approach to social listening) to understand the norms, values, and points of bonding and conflict among 74 online fan communities
- An online survey with 8,000 U.S. fans
- Narrative analysis of 576 fan 'origin stories' and 109 'what my fandom means to me' creative submissions
- Six focus groups with family and friend pairs who shared a fandom

Using grounded theory, we came to understand fandom as a love relationship, one that inspires devotion and active investment because it effectively meets a **set of core human needs surrounding self-care, social connection, and identity.**

What is 'grounded theory'?

Grounded theory is a research approach in which data is collected in response to key questions and systematically coded and analyzed based on themes and patterns that organically arise from it. Relationships between these themes and patterns can then become the basis for new theoretical frameworks. Used mainly in the social sciences, grounded theory differs from a top-down scientific method, in which research sets out to prove or disprove hypotheses about the applicability of existing theories to specific phenomena. Grounded theory offers real benefits when conducting foundational research on social human topics because it tempers assumptions, honors the complexity of human experience, and can shed light on the underlying functions of human behavior.

The KR&I Human Needs Model

About four months into "The Power of Fandom" study, our 'why' excavation surfaced the three basic categories of needs – self-care, social connection, and identity – and as the study progressed, we began to consider the relationship between them. By the end of the study, we arrived at a model that emphasizes the deeply interrelated, non-hierarchical nature of these three psychosocial needs and their centrality to the human experience of navigating life as both an individual and a member of society.
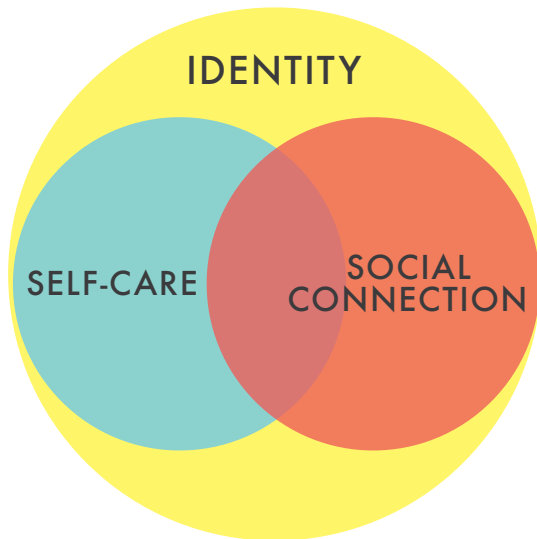
Since its development, this model has proven applicable to a wide array of consumer research topics, helping us understand:

- The role that life transitions play in decision-making
- The adoption of new technology
- The appeal of various entertainment genres
- Changing perceptions of the role entertainment plays in our lives
- Why we have 'guilty pleasures'
- How fandom operates at different life stages
- News preferences and political polarization
- How we are coping with a pandemic
- And more

In any given study, as we dig for 'whys,' we ask if and how these three core human needs may be operating.

For the most part, these human needs operate at the subconscious level. We don't actually 'think' in terms of these needs; rather, we intuitively respond to them. Throughout any given day, our needs rise to consciousness through feelings of discomfort, vulnerability, dissatisfaction, longing, and desire, among others. We respond by eating, drinking, planning, buying, structuring, resting, watching, playing, connecting, and a whole array of other behaviors that quell need-signaling emotions.

SELF - CARE

Referring to far more than the occasional bubble bath and glass of wine, self-care encompasses the whole range of needs related to caring for the individual, embodied self. For example:

- Establishing and maintaining physical health, safety, and well-being
- Regulating energy and emotion
- Understanding a wide range of emotions
- Developing and maintaining cognitive skills/function

Among the three needs, self-care seems the most obvious and consciously accessible. Consumers who switch from an analog doorbell to a smart one so they can see who is at the front door, whenever and wherever they are, report doing so **to feel safer and more secure**. Fans readily identify how watching a favorite episode, listening to their favorite musical artist, or keeping up with a favorite YouTube creator can **make them feel better**, providing comfort and emotional refuge. Even when our attachment doesn't reach the level of fandom, we are often aware that entertainment content can provide relief, offering a much-needed mental break ("an escape") and a symbolic investment in our personal needs and desires ("me time").

But self-care isn't just about soothing experiences; it can also involve **feeling a wide array of (often intense) emotions** – from a safe distance. Part catharsis, part emotional exploration, experiences that expose us to emotional highs and lows help us understand the range of emotion available to us, allowing us to more effectively recognize and prepare for the emotions we experience in our own lives. Fandom is excellent at this: we can feel the joy of watching our team win a championship and the heartbreak of a loss; profound appreciation of our favorite artist's new song or disappointment at a change in style; pride that a beloved story touts values of justice and equality and disgust that the author flouts those very same values in everyday life. Beyond fandom, drama as a genre, whether fiction or non-fiction, in a show, movie, book, game, fan fic, video, or song can also take us on an emotional roller-coaster ride and offer us self-care through emotional exposure and release.

Mental work can also operate as a form of self-care. The problem-solving, Easter egg-hunting, calculating, theorizing, and speculating we do when we consume entertainment content, read the news, assess our team's stats, solve puzzles, or evaluate our purchase options help maintain and (sometimes) expand cognitive pathways. Beyond mere knowledge acquisition, these experiences require the mind to wrestle with relationships between ideas, looking for similarities and differences, cause and effect, alternate explanations, and more, helping to keeping our minds active and agile.

Finally, self-care includes **finding hope**. Hope may seem to belong in loftier terrain than the consumer realm – yet the way we look forward to consumption experiences belies this assumption. Whether we are looking forward to a good meal, the next season of a favorite show, the release of a new sneaker, a much-needed vacation, anticipating pleasurable, meaningful consumption experiences lifts us up. In fact, one of the primary benefits of fandom is its ability to give us something to look forward to in everyday life. Like a beacon in the daily current of thought and emotion, fandom and other pleasurable consumption experiences can focus our minds on something positive and satisfying that awaits in the future, reminding us that life continuously offers experiences that make it worth living.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

As social creatures, humans experience a range of needs related to securing and sustaining bonds with other people and communities, such as:

- Forging new social relationships
- Maintaining existing relationships
- Feeling a sense of belonging within broader social groups

While we all feel the need to bond with other people, initiating connection comes with risks – will the other person reciprocate, do they have anything in common with us, can we trust them? We may not think about it, but our consumer behavior can actually help us mitigate these risks. When we wear a T-shirt from our favorite brand or a hat that represents a recent vacation destination, we are signaling to others what we care about and what life experiences we've had. In these moments, we **spark connection with others who share our interests** and, sometimes, these likeminded strangers even become new friends. Because it showcases the things we love most, fandom, in particular, can help us identify others who share our passion and with whom we can build meaningful, long-term relationships. Repeatedly in our various studies of fandom, we have heard stories of fans meeting best friends and significant others through the entertainment, sports, music, and hobbies they love.

Once established, social bonds must be maintained, and our interests, preferences, and fandoms – and the consumer behavior associated with them – can help us **strengthen and deepen existing relationships.** When we introduce a loved one to our favorite band, a new restaurant, or an app that makes life easier, we are creating a common point of connection to which both parties can return time and again. When a family, group of friends, or team of co-workers enjoy the same movies, partake in the same hobbies, or root for the same basketball team, those shared interests can provide go-to topics of conversation, as well as meaningful shared experiences and emotions. These shared interests and experiences can even ease strained relationships by serving as a reminder of commonality and a starting point for reconnection.

Though perhaps less obvious to us, our experience of social connection extends beyond our immediate social circles and relationships. Whether we find it in our nation, our religion, our politics, our profession, our fandom, or some other flashpoint for social aggregation and community-building, we derive social connection when we feel a sense of **belonging within a broader group or 'imagined community.'**[3] Although we don't know everyone else in these communities, we nonetheless feel connected to them by nature of shared interests, values, meaning making, and experiences. This sense of belonging to larger social groups makes us feel connected to a more expansive and enduring social fabric, part of something bigger than ourselves. And when we get the chance to feel the collective energy and power of these larger groups through the shared emotion that erupts at concerts, live games, fan conventions, community holiday celebrations, rallies, and protests, we can feel awed, even spiritually moved, by a sense of profound interconnectedness. Such experiences serve to reinforce our social nature and all the commercial choices that support it.

3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* Rev. and extended ed. (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

IDENTITY

Expansive and often subconscious, identity needs involve the full experience and expression of the self as both an individual and a member of society, including:

- Understanding the current self
- Understanding and reconnecting with past selves
- Envisioning future selves
- Making sense of one's place in the world

Of the three needs, identity seems least understood. This may be, in part, because it's often oversimplified in everyday discourse. More specifically, the term 'identity' frequently gets reduced to a handful of social categories: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on.

But identity actually holds so much more; in fact, it encompasses all the ways we experience, understand, and express ourselves. Identity is *multi-dimensional and complex,* and the numerous facets of the self may not always seem aligned with one another. Identity is *dynamic*, changing as we accumulate life experiences that help us continuously write and rewrite the story of who we are. Identity is *performed*, meaning we bring various dimensions to the fore in response to any given social situation or role – as a child or parent, co-worker or boss, friend or romantic partner. And identity is *socially embedded*: we understand who we are by evaluating how we are similar to and different from others.

As consumers, the products, services, brands, entertainment, and experiences with which we engage help us navigate all of these different features of identity (with a capital 'I') as well as the unique and specific facets of our own identities. At any given point in our lives, our consumer behaviors help us **compose the story of our current self,** especially in relation to others. More specifically, due to the inherently social nature of meaning, the things we buy, watch, play, read, listen to, eat, wear, and do help us discern and express, "I am this type of person, and I belong with these types of people" or, conversely, "I am not this type of person, and I do not belong with these types of people." For example, our decision to shop at an organic grocery store or buy an electric car reinforces to ourselves – and reveals to the world – that we care about the environment. In this way, the commercial landscape serves as an expansive palette for the expression of the self, with each choice holding and conveying meaning about who we consider – or want – ourselves to be.

Importantly, though, our desires and impulses sometimes conflict with our self 'story.' (As it turns out, the Whole Foods shopper who drives a Prius actually enjoys a Quarter Pounder now and then.) Because they don't fit neatly into the stories we hope to tell about ourselves, we often keep such 'guilty pleasures' secret. Nevertheless, our research demonstrates that **guilty pleasures operate as important levers in the navigation of identity,** offering opportunities for the individual to resist and set boundaries vis-à-vis the expectations of other people.

Our need to understand and express the self is not limited to the present; it requires us to look both backwards and forwards, **making sense of who we've been in the past and who we want to be in the future.** When we re-watch our favorite Disney movies, listen to songs we loved in high school, or buy a T-shirt depicting a beloved childhood cartoon character, we travel – if ever so briefly and incompletely – back in time, revisiting who we've been and how we've felt at previous points in our

lives. We return from the trip with a heightened sense of how we've changed and stayed the same over time. In fathoming the future self, what we choose to consume can sometimes help us envision the people we want to become – like a sewing hobby that leads to a career in fashion or admiration for an altruistic character who provides moral guidance in an entertainment fan's own life.
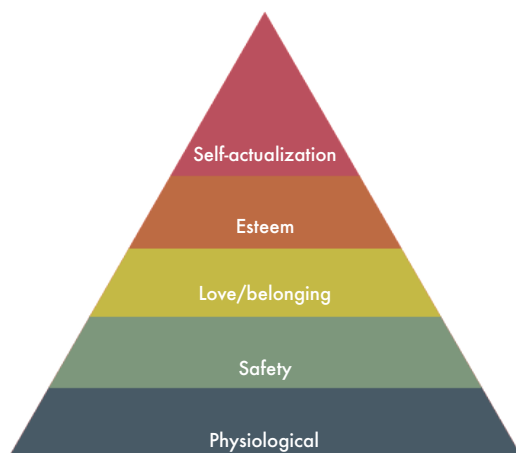
Why This Model Matters

In the KR&I model, self-care and social connection rest within the realm of identity, reflecting the fundamental, encompassing human need to possess a sense of 'self' and to understand that 'self' in relation to other people and society more broadly. However, the primacy of identity should not be misinterpreted as an indication of hierarchy in the model. In fact, a defining feature of the model is its lack of hierarchy.

In developing the model, KR&I joins a long line of scholars, consumer researchers, medical professionals, social workers, and philanthropists focusing on core human needs to explain the underlying drivers of human behavior. While numerous models have been developed, none has proven as enduring or widely accepted as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In particular, its success seems related to how pleasingly neat its hierarchical order feels. Beyond basic physiological needs, the model tells us we must first meet our needs for security and safety. Once we've checked that box, we can move on to love and belonging. Then, with our social needs covered, we can work on our inner life, fulfilling our needs for self-esteem and, if we're lucky, the holy grail of self-actualization. It's like a step-by-step recipe for making a well-rounded person.

But, as satisfyingly ordered as Maslow's model might be, it doesn't sufficiently account for the complex, intrinsically social nature of human beings. For instance, our ability to meet needs for shelter can be enhanced (or undermined) by our social relationships, social status, and understanding of ourselves. Moreover, it assumes that each need occurs discretely and sequentially when, in reality, we experience our needs for self-care, social connection, and identity all at once.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs[4]

- Self-actualization
- Esteem
- Love/belonging
- Safety
- Physiological

KR&I Human Needs Model

IDENTITY

SELF-CARE

SOCIAL CONNECTION
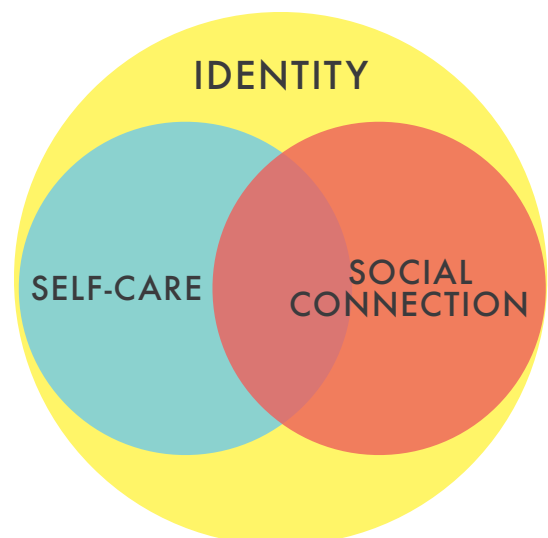
4. Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-96.

In contrast, the KR&I model – in which the needs are deliberately overlapping and non-hierarchical – honors the way our socially constructed realities shape our ability to meet our individual needs for survival and self-understanding. As a result, this model can be applied to nearly any consumer behavior to identify which underlying need or needs it meets primarily, without obscuring the role that other inter-related needs play. For example, watching comedy may most obviously meet needs surrounding self-care because it can give us a mental break, boost our mood, and provide emotional release through laughter. But comedy can also make difficult social issues feel more manageable and approachable and help reduce social barriers, enhancing our ability to meet our needs for social connection. And, of course, the types of comedies we watch can reinforce and help us express how we think about ourselves, whether silly, smart, offbeat, cynical, wholesome, or something else.

Finally, in addition to capturing the way human needs co-exist and can be co-fulfilled, our model also attempts to bridge the longstanding chasm between academic and consumer research. To the academic eye, consumer research can seem like a commercially motivated pantomime of the rigorous, ostensibly agenda-less knowledge production of the academy. From the consumer research perspective, academic research, while respected, can seem inefficient and impractical, too slow and indirect to inform real-world business strategies.

Though academic research and consumer research seem to exist at odds, they, ironically, have one thing in common: their respective blind spots can obscure opportunities for the meaningful study of consumer behavior. Academia's skepticism and business' impatience compromise our ability to recognize the full value people derive from commercial experiences. Thus, the hybridization of these two realms – represented by KR&I's human needs model and our research approach more broadly – offers a unique vantage point from which to learn about human beings and, importantly, to understand why we care so deeply about what we consume.

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