

Not everyone wants to delegate their chores to technology

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Household chores have a bad reputation. Many of us do not particularly like doing the dishes and cleaning the floor. No wonder companies are leveraging advances in robotics and artificial intelligence to introduce a new class of autonomous products, which promise to free us entirely from everyday chores.

These gadgets operate without human oversight and free [consumers](#) from mundane chores. Sounds great, right?

Well, it turns out that manual tasks have an inherent value to some of us. In a [series of studies](#) we show that autonomous products may actually strip away a source of [meaning](#) in life, despite unquestionable benefits such as efficiency and convenience. As a result, some people are hesitant to buy these products.

Automated vs. autonomous products

It is important to highlight the difference between automation and autonomy. Automated products require consumers to perform some manual labor themselves—think of a conventional vacuum cleaner that still needs to be operated manually.

However, autonomous products do not require any work from humans. Examples of manual tasks being replaced by autonomous products include cleaning the floor ([robotic vacuum cleaners](#)), mowing the lawn (robotic lawn mowers), and driving (self-driving cars). Autonomous products free consumers from daily chores by fully taking over manual tasks that require time and effort.

The meaning of manual labor

In our studies, we 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 because the exerted effort is rewarding in the future.

Our studies show that consumers who value what we call the Meaning of

Manual Labor (MML) perceive autonomous products more negatively. For example, [one study conducted in collaboration with industry partners](#) shows that consumers who derive more meaning from manual tasks (those who particularly value MML) are less likely to choose autonomous products over conventional ones. Likewise, these consumers have a more negative attitude toward autonomous products. They are also more likely to focus on the disadvantages of autonomous products (e.g. too much focus on technology in life) instead of their advantages (e.g. convenience).

Alternative sources of meaning

On the one hand, autonomous products take over tasks from consumers, typically leading to a reduction in manual labor and therefore in the ability to derive meaning from manual tasks.

On the other hand, by taking over manual tasks, autonomous products free up time and provide consumers with the opportunity to spend this time on other, potentially more meaningful, tasks and activities. To appeal to these consumers, companies could emphasize that autonomous products can provide more time with friends and family.

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 per year](#).

Some companies go a step further by suggesting what consumers could do with their extra free 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 the completed task (i.e., cooking a

delicious meal), the company emphasizes that consumers can spend time on other activities.

Marketing and promotion opportunities

Our studies demonstrate that consumers' perception of MML is key to predicting the adoption of autonomous products. Consumers who value MML tend to resist the delegation of manual tasks to autonomous products. However, sources of meaning such as spending time with family and friends are, generally, universal.

The extent of consumers' perception of MML can be assessed simply by observing their behavior, such as whether they 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, and painting are likely predictors of MML being important in a person's life.

In promotions, firms can highlight the meaningful time consumers gain with the use of autonomous products (e.g., "this product does the cleaning, so you can spend time on other, more meaningful tasks and pursuits"). Presenting the benefits in this way increases consumers' likelihood to adopt autonomous products.

Finally, companies need to be aware that even tedious chores can be meaningful to consumers. Some consumers may derive less overall meaning in life by using autonomous products, so they might not be the target market for these products. For many people, taking care of the things that matter to them, and by extension the people that matter—by cleaning the house for them or cooking from scratch—might be meaningful enough in and of itself.

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