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A sociosemiotics mapping of consumer-AI agent interactions in consumption journeys

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Abstract

From playlist nudges to volatile chatbot role-play, AI agents redraw consumption journeys. Drawing on sociosemiotics, this conceptual paper explores four ever-changing consumer-AI agents regimes of interactions: manipulating, complying, adjusting, and risking. Each reshuffles power, memory, and uncertainty. I conclude with five actionable tactics that translate sociosemiotics insight into day-to-day consumption journey design.Keywords: artificial intelligence, AI agents, consumption journeys, sociosemiotics

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Introduction

"Call the hotel and ask if they have early check-in." With this simple instruction, consumers of OpenAI's Operator or Google's "Ask for Me" can now delegate everyday interactions to artificial intelligence (AI) agents that behave less like obedient tools and more like semi-autonomous, proactive, and conversational colleagues (Deng et al., 2025). These agents are a significant evolution in consumer-facing AI. Unlike earlier versions of assistants like Siri or Alexa, which relied on narrow command-reply structures, contemporary AI agents interpret goals, navigate uncertainty, and complete tasks with minimal oversight. Operator, for example, can browse websites, fill in forms, and make purchases. "Ask for Me" can call customer service on your behalf, analyze human conversation, and report back. What we see here is an evolution from assistance to replacement, from queries to delegation (Lima, 2024). This technological shift calls for a conceptual reorientation.

In this conceptual paper, I discuss how AI agents shape, drive, and sometimes short-circuit the flow of everyday consumption life. As these agents become embedded in consumption experiences, the very grammar of consumer-AI agent interactions along consumption journeys shifts. Here, Landowski's (2005) sociosemiotics offers a unique way to make sense of this. Meaning, he argues, emerges through different regimes of sensible and intelligible interactions across actants— any entities, human or non-human, that perform actions or have agency (Landowski, 2005). In marketing terms, meaning materializes as the value consumers attribute to the interaction. Those regimes thus bleed into one another as consumption journeys unfold, a drift amplified by AI systems characterised by unprecedented agency, autonomy, and unpredictability (Belk, 2024). What consumers experience thus is a dynamic, responsive, and ethically charged choreography. As such, marketing management must move beyond funnel metaphors and begin designing for regimes that comprise elastic, empathy-sensitive patterns of interaction where consumers and AI agents negotiate control, trust, and value in real time.

Consumption journeys

Access-based consumption journeys are not linear itineraries but improvisational acts within unstable systems. As Trujillo-Torres et al. (2023) argue, these journeys unfold through fragile interdependencies, with consumers operating as logistical agents, stretching platform protocols, hacking delivery gaps, and bending rules to fit personal timelines. Value emerges from their ability to maneuver amid breakdowns. This frictive, partial, and contingent navigation produces stickiness that exceeds emotional design or brand loyalty. By contrast, Schau and Akaka (2020) shift the frame from system to individual consumers, showing the recursive rhythms of lived practices. In their view, journeys gain meaning through repetition and revision: a runner adjusting pace because of their Apple Watch suggestions, a caregiver adapting rituals based on the AI-powered Philips Premium Connected Baby Monitor. Here, value is a byproduct of reflective return, not infrastructural choreography. These two orientations, external contingency and internal reflexivity, do not contradict so much as they overlap. The unpredictability of logistics meets the variability of self-understanding, creating a layered account of consumer movement. It is there that Landowski's (2005) sociosemiotics has the potential to expand current discussions on consumer-AI interactions in consumption journeys as an ongoing negotiation between

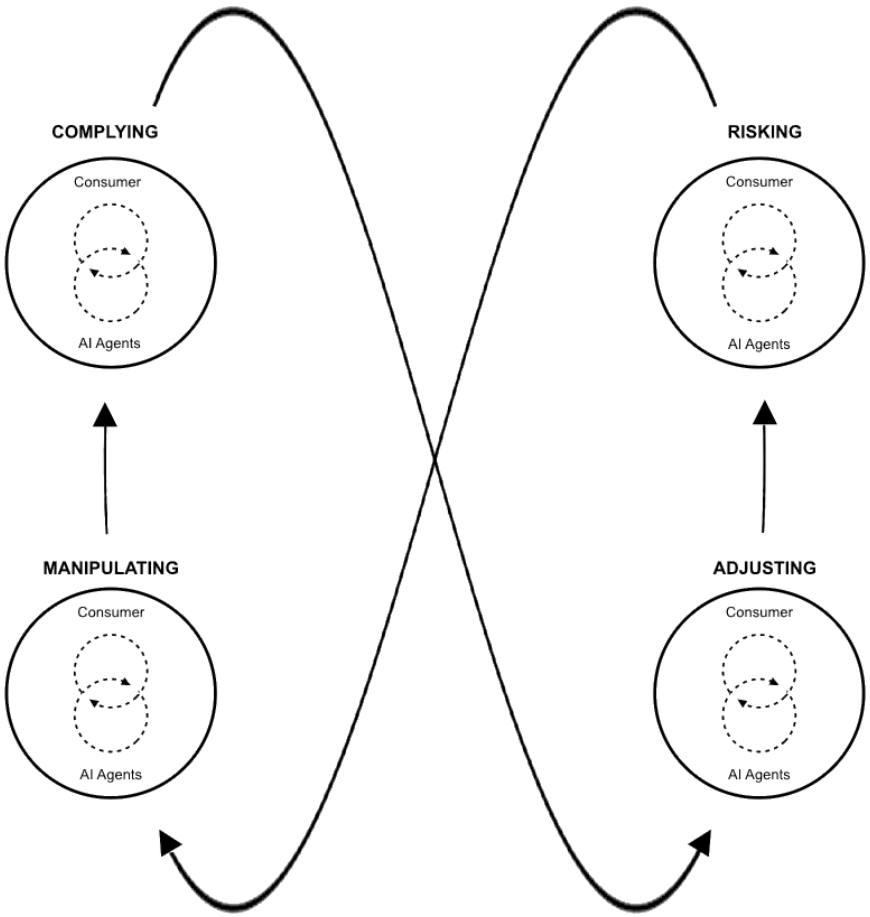
structure, agency, and sense-making. Consumer-AI agent interactions become a test site, where structure and improvisation merge. Each decision becomes a negotiation, each glitch a sociosemiotics cue, each success a provisional alignment rather than a resolved outcome (Lima et al., 2021).

Sociosemiotics: consumer–AI agents regimes of interactions

Landowski's (2005) sociosemiotics has four regimes of interactions through which actants co-produce meaning. They are *Manipulating, Complying, Adjusting, and Risking*. Each regime has a different way of making something happen (e.g., purchase a product) or making someone (e.g., consumers) or something (e.g., an AI agent) want (e.g., desire a new product or request more data) or do something (e.g., click on a link). They provide a new grammar for understanding agency that is relevant for AI-mediated consumption journeys. Figure 1 illustrates the proposal.

Figure 1

Consumer-AI agents regimes of interactions



Manipulating emerges most clearly when actants, humans and non-humans, guide interaction through calculated and well-defined scripts. This is the case of Duolingo's AI tutor. It engages learners with encouraging corrections, but behind the surface-level

warmth lies a structured sequence that optimizes retention and monetization. The gentle prompts to continue, the gamified rewards, and the premium features presented as natural extensions all create a choreography of engagement where the consumers' progression seems autonomous but remains tied to predetermined logics. Influence here becomes immersive rather than instructive. What distinguishes this regime is not the presence of control but the absence of its visibility. Intention is embedded, not declared (Landowski, 2005). By contrast, the regime of *Complying* enmeshes into the threads of everyday life. Replika, an AI companion app, begins as an emotional interlocutor but gradually embeds itself into consumers' affective routines. The app tracks mood, asks about dreams, recalls earlier conversations, and begins to scaffold emotional regulation without ever making human-like demands. Over time, the consumer no longer responds to prompts; they anticipate them. Interaction becomes patterned, almost atmospheric (Landowski, 2005). Trust is not granted but accrued through repetition, until the system becomes an extension of the self (Belk, 2024). These regimes do not exclude each other as they happen in a fluid and organic manner. In a single Spotify session, for example, the AI DJ first manipulates by foregrounding a premium remix, then slips into complying as the listener lets autoplay run. One guides softly, the other stabilizes silently. Together, they combine the foundation where agency is distributed, and decision feels like flow.

Adjusting and *Risking* complicate this foundation. They do not erase structure but make it way more porous. For example, Canva's Magic Write, prompt and response become a duet in which consumers offer fragments, the system replies, consumers revise, and the tool recalibrates. Over time, neither side takes the lead. Rather, a rhythm emerges from mutual responsiveness (Landowski, 2005). Style, tone, and direction shift through subtle inference, and authorship begins to fragment. But *Risking* tilts the balance. In platforms like Character.AI, consumers engage with simulated personas, expecting improvisation but encountering volatility. Conversations drift, sometimes playful, sometimes disorienting, and what begins in entertainment can collapse into affective uncertainty (Malfacini, 2025). This is not the case of malfunctioning per se, as it sometimes is the case of exceeding boundaries. Here, unpredictability is a constitutive condition, and drifts, misalignments, and ruptures are built-in. The journey becomes unmoored, not broken, but estranged. If *Adjusting* feels like an ongoing duet of co-creation of meaning, *Risking* feels like walking into a room where the script has been misplaced. The consumer remains present, but the coordinates of sense begin to fade.

Conclusion

AI agents no longer operate at the margins of marketing and consumption journeys. They are embedded within it, reshaping how decisions are made; actions are remembered, and interactions are authored. What looks like efficiency is often a reorganization of power and responsibility. Landowski's (2005) sociosemiotics help frame these shifts not as seamless upgrades but as structured ways in which AI agents shape consumption behavior. *Manipulating* guides outcomes through subtle design, appearing helpful while steering action. *Complying* embeds systems into routine until they become part of the background, requiring little thought or engagement. *Adjusting* brings responsiveness, where consumers and AI agents adapt to each other through ongoing feedback. Risking involves unpredictable outcomes, where the system's actions can surprise, delight, or unsettle. Each regime frames a different mode of influence and expectation during the consumption journey.

As companies work with multiple AI agents across contexts, they must manage transitions, deciding whether to ethically persuade, when to automate, when to co-create, and when

to allow uncertainty. Coordination, not uniformity, becomes key in designing consumption journeys based on Landowski's (2005) sociosemiotics. Two principles support this work: transparency that signals how and why the system acts before trust erodes, and sensibility that helps absorb confusion when one form of interaction shifts into another. Table 1 outlines five specific tactics linked to different AI agents, illustrating how design aligned with regime logic can produce experiences that are flexible, grounded, and resilient under scrutiny.

Table 1
Five sociosemiotics-based tactics

Regime	Do	Why it matters	Illustrative examples
Manipulating	Make intention legible before it acts.	When nudges arrive cloaked in neutrality, they risk backlash. Legible intent is crucial for ethical interaction and informed consumer awareness.	Spotify's AI DJ, which introduces its logic before it curates.
Complying	Introduce moments that interrupt the flow.	Habits that run too deep begin to feel imposed. Light friction restores a sense of participation.	Nest Thermostat's seasonal check-ins that ask users to reassess.
Adjusting	Offer tools that let consumers co-direct adaptation.	Shared shaping builds investment. The system becomes less of a tool and more of a companion.	Grammarly's tone and formality sliders that tune writing style *in situ*.
Risking	Let uncertainty play, but within reversible frames.	Risk becomes tolerable when the exit is visible. Contained unpredictability invites trust rather than fear.	Robinhood's AI Options Coach, which stages simulated trading before live action.

Responsibility for adjustment begins with companies: product teams must flag model updates and supply light retraining cues, so consumers never learn blindly. Risk, however, is coowned; regulators can require optout sandboxes and tamperproof audit trails, so liability does not slide onto endconsumers. Data supervision remains a collective work in which privacybydesign standards must follow the agent wherever it goes, verified through thirdparty team tests and regular algorithmic impact reviews. Aligning these practices turns sociosemiotics insights into a governance scaffold able to pace, rather than merely chase, AI autonomy.

For researchers interested in consumer-AI agent interactions and consumption journeys, future work may explore how consumers move, often imperceptibly, from persuasion to habit, from co-creation to rupture. Clickstream traces paired with ambient sentiment cues could surface these transitions not as events but as gradients, revealing how interactions stretch or snap across regimes in real time. Over longer periods of interactions, we need to know whether so-called empathy layers genuinely buffer these movements or simply defer friction, buying time without shifting structure (Belk, 2022). Cross-cultural variation also matters. Preferences for routine over ambiguity, or deference over autonomy, may recalibrate the cadence of these interactions, altering not only how regimes happen but how they are perceived and lived. But beyond consumption experiences, there is a deeper question: in the case of negative events, who carries the weight of responsibility in these

transitions? As discussed, the regimes of interactions show how attention, work, and control are enmeshed in consumer-AI agent interactions. Mapping that redistribution, where effort flows, who owns adjustment, and who absorbs risk, will be essential for anchoring this framework in policy, accountability, and more contested contexts of algorithmic governance.

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