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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Navigating consumption streams: Toward a utilitarian–hedonic perspective on subscription box customer journeys

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Abstract

Given persistent challenges faced by subscription box retailers in acquiring and retaining customers, there is an urgent need to understand decision-making and sources of value at each stage of the subscription box customer journey. As extant research has frequently focused on the customers' decision to subscribe, relatively little work has explored why they choose to continue or cancel their subscriptions. We contend that a way forward in understanding subscription box customer journeys is to adopt a utilitarian–hedonic perspective when looking at each stage of such journeys. We conduct phenomenological in-depth interviews with 26 subscription box customers and use the thematic insights to introduce a processual framework of subscription boxes as consumption streams. We posit that the subscription box customer journey comprises three key decision stages (initiation, immersion, and egression) with each stage characterized by distinct themes that add to or subtract from the utilitarian and hedonic value at that stage. Collectively, these themes provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors that shape customer decisions to start, renew, or cancel a subscription box. We conclude by noting how our findings contribute to marketing theory and practice and suggest some avenues for future research.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen rapid worldwide growth in businesses that rely on a subscription box model, wherein customers sign up to receive regularly scheduled deliveries of products belonging to a variety of categories ranging from cosmetics and apparel to meal kits and dog treats (Heegaard, 2021). Broadly, such boxes come in three different formats: replenishment, curation, and access (Chen et al., 2018). Replenishment subscriptions deliver the same items on a recurring schedule (e.g., Dollar Shave Club for razors), curation subscriptions prioritize novelty and variety by providing customers with different item assortments (e.g., Lpsy for cosmetics), and access subscriptions provide customers with members-only perks or lower prices (e.g., First Leaf for wines). Of the three, curation subscriptions are the most popular, comprising 55% of the market, with replenishment subscriptions coming in

next at 32% and access subscriptions at a relatively minor 13% (Chen et al., 2018).

Recent estimates show that the global subscription box market reached a value of over \$31 billion in 2023 and is expected to grow nearly fivefold to reach \$145 billion within a decade (Expert Market Research, 2023; Wertz, 2022). Despite this meteoric rise, several businesses within this industry continue to face significant challenges linked to customer acquisition and customer churn (Chen et al., 2018; Nordqvist, 2023; Thomas, 2022). While attracting new customers in an increasingly competitive market is hard, retaining them is even harder as average customer churn is often as high as 40% (Andonova et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2018). Given how these issues impact even established subscription box brands such as HelloFresh, Blue Apron, and StitchFix (Lee, 2022), a pressing need persists to better understand the perceived value of such boxes for customers at each stage of their subscription box customer journeys (Savary & Dhar, 2020; Umashankar et al., 2023). Not only can that help shed additional light on what drives customers to sign up for subscription boxes, but also

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what drives customers to renew or terminate them. The lack of such an understanding is further likely to burden retailers with additional problems beyond the routine challenges of operating a subscription box service (Cratejoy, 2023).

With this study, we aim to address this gap by conceptualizing the subscription box experience as a multi-stage customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tueanrat et al., 2021a) and qualitatively exploring different factors that add to or take away from utilitarian and hedonic value at each stage (Babin et al., 1994; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Voss et al., 2003). While there have been some attempts to examine how utilitarian and hedonic factors influence subscription box consumption (e.g., Bhatt et al., 2021; Bray et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2020), most extant work has been limited by a focus on a single product category (e.g., fashion), a single format (e.g., curation), or a single decision stage (e.g., the likelihood of signing up). Consequently, extant discourse lacks an integrated perspective of subscription boxes across a variety of product categories and formats in addition to missing insight into how customers experience utilitarian and hedonic value at each decision stage of the journey.

We undertake a phenomenological inquiry to study a variety of subscription box experiences via in-depth interviews with 26 consumers. To parsimoniously capture the three key decision-making junctures involved in such experiences (signing up, continuing with, and terminating a subscription), we also introduce the idea of *consumption streams* to the marketing literature to describe subscription box customer journeys. Drawing a parallel to a stream that consists of a steady flow of water originating from a source and moving downstream, we introduce the notion that subscription box customer journeys can be viewed as consumption streams (steady flows) of products originating from different retailers and delivered downstream to customers at regular intervals. Each such journey involves three decision stages: *initiation* or entering the stream (a customer signs up for a box); *immersion* or remaining in the stream (the customer continues their subscription); and *egression* or leaving the stream (the customer terminates the subscription). As we go on to show through our findings, different themes characterize the utilitarian and hedonic value at each of these three stages due to their additive nature (as seen in the initiation and immersion stages) or their subtractive nature (as seen in the egression stage).

Our research makes three key contributions to marketing theory. First, we add to the nascent body of work examining the effects of utilitarian and hedonic value on subscription box consumption. While extant work has documented these effects in terms of the initial decision—signing up for a subscription box (Bhatt et al., 2021; Bray et al., 2021; Hasan & Liu, 2020; Kerschbaumer et al., 2023)—we illustrate a similar effect in terms of the other two key decisions—continuing and terminating a subscription. Additionally, as our consumption stream framework is not limited to a particular product category or format, it is able to accommodate a variety of subscription box customer journeys parsimoniously yet comprehensively. Second, given that we conceptualize subscription box consumption as a customer journey, we also build on recent research highlighting the advantages of adopting a utilitarian–hedonic theoretical lens when studying customer journeys (Blinda et al., 2019; Ponsignon, 2023;

Stein & Ramaseshan, 2020). Specifically, we show how customers frequently incorporate assessments of both types of value—utilitarian as well as hedonic—during key decision stages of the journey. This serves as an important point of contrast against prior work that has tended to conceptualize such journeys as primarily utilitarian or primarily hedonic (Blinda et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020). Finally, our findings also contribute to the rich discourse on the customer journey concept itself (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Tueanrat et al., 2021a) by addressing the often-voiced need to understand factors that lead to the continuation and discontinuation of customer journeys (Court et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Siebert et al., 2020) and by foregrounding the customer perspective via the narrative accounts of people describing how they decided to start, continue, and end their subscription box experiences.

Given this background, we now discuss the relevant theoretical background for our work. We begin with overviews of the customer journey concept and the utilitarian–hedonic perspective. This is followed by a discussion on how this perspective has been used in recent research on customer journeys to acquire insights on how utilitarian and hedonic factors affect customer experiences. We look at some gaps that remain within this domain and how studying subscription box customer journeys helps address them. The final subsection summarizes extant work on subscription box consumption that has acknowledged the importance of looking at utilitarian and hedonic factors and describes how the present study helps overcome some of the limitations of prior work on this topic.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | The customer journey concept: Overview, utility, and gaps

Given its flexibility in accommodating several types of purchases, the customer journey concept has rapidly gained prominence within marketing discourse over the last decade (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tueanrat et al., 2021a). Essentially, a customer journey comprises the process or sequence of events that a customer encounters when trying to acquire and use a market offering (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). The customer experience during this process, therefore, is conceptualized as a journey that the customer embarks upon with a firm over the course of the purchase process. Consequently, it provides a useful metaphor to represent the dynamic nature of customer experience that is shaped by different factors during the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages (Hamilton & Price, 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017). Most importantly, it centers the customers' perspective (instead of the firms') and allows for a thorough consideration of their experience at each critical stage of the journey (Tueanrat et al., 2021a). Even though a large body of conceptual and empirical work has rapidly accumulated over the past decade on this topic (Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Tueanrat et al., 2021a), there have been several calls in favor of research that could help us better understand the nuances of customer experience at each stage and the factors that lead customers to

continue or discontinue their journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tueanrat et al., 2021a). Additionally, there is a need to develop frameworks for journeys that do not fit neatly within the traditional demarcation of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages (Hamilton & Price, 2019).

We contend that subscription boxes provide a fitting research context to address such calls. Signing up for a subscription essentially entails signing up for multiple service cycles (Siebert et al., 2020) wherein each cycle involves a box of products being shipped to the customer at regular intervals. Consequently, a single purchase (signing up for a subscription) facilitates multiple rounds of consumption depending on the number of boxes the customer signs up for. Furthermore, if the journey continues to be a positive one, the customer has the option of extending it by renewing their subscription. However, if the journey falls short of their expectations, they are likely to end it by actively cancelling the subscription (if the firm allows that) or not renewing it once it has run its course. Which is why, as discussed earlier in the introduction and illustrated later through the findings, our metaphor of the stream with its three stages of initiation, immersion, and egression is better suited to describe such a journey rather than the traditional pre-core-post sequence. Furthermore, to enable a more nuanced look at how customers experience the value of the subscription box at each stage and why they decide to sign up, continue, and/or discontinue them, we adopt the utilitarian–hedonic theoretical perspective, which we discuss next.

2.2 | The utilitarian–hedonic perspective

A large body of work within marketing research has established that consumers frequently seek utilitarian and hedonic value from their purchases (Babin et al., 1994; Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Voss et al., 2003). While utilitarian value emerges from a product's functionality, efficiency, or its ability in helping consumers accomplish a particular task or achieve a specific goal, hedonic value is linked to the multisensory and experiential aspects of the product and the extent of pleasure, enjoyment, excitement, and fun it can provide (Alba & Williams, 2013; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Rather than being mutually exclusive, however, research has also established that both these values are often complementary (Vieira et al., 2018), such as how “a toothpaste may both prevent cavities and provide pleasure from its taste” (Batra & Ahtola, 1991, p. 161). Consequently, a market offering can be viewed as a combination of utilitarian and hedonic value such that it might be simultaneously high on both aspects (e.g., a snack such as trail mix that is nutritious as well as tasty), predominantly utilitarian (e.g., a hammer), or predominantly hedonic (e.g., fast food).

Later work has further established that both types of value have significant downstream effects in terms of retail outcomes. Utilitarian value positively affects satisfaction, repurchase intention, and loyalty, while hedonic value positively affects satisfaction, word-of-mouth, repurchase anticipation, and loyalty (Jones et al., 2006). Substantiating these findings, a meta-analysis showed that the positive effect of utilitarian and hedonic value on loyalty and word-of-mouth was in fact

mediated by perceived value and satisfaction from the purchase (Vieira et al., 2018). Given such findings, it is not surprising that scholars have increasingly examined the influence of both utilitarian and hedonic value on customer journeys.

2.3 | The utilitarian–hedonic perspective on customer journeys

Prior work has often tended to look at utilitarian and hedonic journeys separately by investigating differences between purchase contexts prized for efficiency and convenience (i.e., high in utilitarian value) and others prized for enjoyment and experiential aspects (i.e., high in hedonic value). Blinda et al. (2019), for instance, find that experience-oriented customer participation (e.g., being able to customize a restaurant meal to one's taste) is better suited than outcome-oriented customer participation (e.g., being able to self-checkout at grocery stores) when it comes to hedonic journeys. Similarly, Siebert et al. (2020, p. 50) discuss how utilitarian contexts benefit from “smooth journeys” characterized by firms providing consistent support to customers during decision-making (which secures loyalty), while hedonic contexts benefit from “sticky journeys” characterized by firms providing endless variety, unpredictability, and surprise to consumers (which ensures involvement). Elsewhere, Stein and Ramaseshan (2020) find that store design, ambience, and customer interaction with service personnel were more instrumental in improving customer experience during hedonic journeys, while service convenience was more instrumental in doing so for utilitarian journeys. Furthermore, to expand the customer journey beyond physical retail, some researchers have shown how information channel usage differs between online journeys for utilitarian and hedonic products (Li et al., 2020) and how customers seek out utilitarian and hedonic benefits differently depending on the avenue (physical retail, online retail, or omnichannel) they use during the purchase process (Tueanrat et al., 2021b).

While this body of work has done much to extend our knowledge of the role utilitarian and hedonic value play in customer journeys, the bifurcation of journeys as predominantly utilitarian or predominantly hedonic has been criticized for its limitations (Ponsignon, 2023) given that customer journeys can benefit from incorporating both utilitarian and hedonic value across different stages (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Siebert et al., 2020; Tueanrat et al., 2021a). Adding to this concern is the fact that, barring a few exceptions (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Ponsignon, 2023), hardly any empirical work has looked at how customers experience both utilitarian and hedonic value during a journey. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no research has yet considered the customer perspective of utilitarian and hedonic value at each key decision stage of their journey. Prior research has either adopted the firm perspective (Ponsignon, 2023) or looked at the journey as a whole rather than focusing on each stage (Kuehnl et al., 2019). This constitutes a further gap in extant discourse on this topic given that a stage-based focus can illuminate specific factors that play a role in shaping the customer experience at each stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Siebert et al., 2020; Tueanrat et al., 2021a, 2021b).

We believe that adopting a utilitarian–hedonic perspective to study subscription box customer journeys helps address these gaps. Not only can such journeys provide a useful research context to investigate customer perceptions of utilitarian and hedonic value, but they can also help us understand how such perceptions impact customer decisions at each stage.

2.4 | The utilitarian–hedonic perspective on subscription box customer journeys

Subscription boxes are frequently prized for the combination of utilitarian and hedonic value they provide. Consumers often sign up for boxes due to a mix of utilitarian (convenience, value-seeking, and ease of use) and hedonic (novelty, excitement, adventure, self-gratification, and self-gifting) reasons (Baek & Kim, 2022; Bhatt et al., 2021; Bray et al., 2021; Hasan & Liu, 2020; Jeong et al., 2024; Kerschbaumer et al., 2023). In general, however, little work has looked at the role of utilitarian and hedonic value in other stages (continuation and exit) of the subscription box customer journey. Partial exceptions include work looking at online customer reviews for curated subscription boxes (based on different subscription durations) that found that hedonic value is prized more than utilitarian value for such boxes (Li et al., 2023) and research showing how good or bad surprises can elevate or derail the subscription box journeys of customers who buy such boxes as self-gifts (Gupta et al., 2020). In conjunction with this, another key limitation across most extant work on subscription box experiences has been the lack of an integrative focus. Most prior work has tended to limit its focus to a single product category (e.g., fashion), a single format (e.g., curation), or a single decision stage (e.g., the likelihood of signing up) of the customer journey (Bhatt et al., 2021; Hasan & Liu, 2020; Noorda, 2019; Toteva et al., 2021; Woo & Ramkumar, 2018).

Collectively, such limitations have precluded the development of an integrative utilitarian–hedonic perspective on subscription box customer journeys that not only accounts for the experience of utilitarian and hedonic value (whether additive or subtractive in nature) at each key decision stage of such journeys, but that is also capable of accommodating subscription box experiences across a variety of product categories and formats. To that end, we address this gap with our current study by undertaking a qualitative inquiry into a wide variety of subscription box experiences. As we go on to show, the themes that emerge from our data help us conceptualize a three-stage processual framework of subscription box customer journeys as consumption streams with distinct experiences of utilitarian and hedonic value at each stage. Given this background, we now turn to a discussion of our research methodology.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Data collection

Given our exploratory focus, we employed a phenomenological research approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016) comprising in-depth

interviews with current or recent subscription box users from different states. Respondents were recruited via a combination of purposive and snowball sampling through calls for participation on a social media platform, from researchers' personal contacts, and via respondent referrals. To ensure detailed recall and thick description (Geertz, 1973), we interviewed respondents who were either current subscribers or who had subscribed to at least one box within the last 6 months. Additionally, since the goal of a phenomenology is to arrive at the shared essence of the focal phenomenon that can cut across different cases (Patton, 2002), we also collected respondent accounts across several different types of subscription boxes in terms of formats (e.g., replenishment, curation, and surprise) and categories (e.g., apparel, food, cosmetics, and health products). Our approach was in line with best practices for phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2016) that recommend how data should be collected to cover both the breadth and the depth of individual experiences with the focal phenomenon of interest (i.e., the participatory customer journey for subscription box consumers). The final sample (Table 1) comprised 26 respondents—21 women and 5 men—who participated in the study. Of these, 23 respondents were Caucasian, two were South Asian, and one was Hispanic. In terms of subscription formats, 21 boxes were curation-based (57%), 10 were replenishment-based (27%), and 6 were access-based (16%).

Except for one interview that was conducted with two respondents simultaneously (as they were a married couple), all others were conducted in a one-to-one format (comprising a single interviewer and a single respondent) with the first author conducting 12 and the second conducting the remaining 14. Interviews were either conducted in a neutral in-person setting, such as a library or a cafe, or over the phone or over Zoom. Given the potential for differences between in-person and electronic (phone/Zoom) interviews in terms of depth of discussion and duration (Burnard, 1994; Irvine, 2011), we jointly developed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) to minimize such differences, in line with best practices for in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2003). Additionally, before starting the interview itself, each author would take some time for a conversational warm up (Burnard, 1994) via mutual introductions (especially as the majority of respondents were not personally known to either author) and polite small talk. Collectively, these measures helped ensure robustness and uniformity in data collection as no significant difference was observed between the three interview modes in terms of duration; in-person interviews averaged 44 min in length while phone interviews averaged 47 min and zoom interviews averaged 37 min. As phone interviews can sometimes be shorter than in-person interviews (Irvine, 2011), their longer duration in our study was reassuring as it showed that the depth of discussion was not affected by the interview mode.

Given their advantages in minimizing biases during data collection while still offering sufficient flexibility to allow for follow up questions by interviewers on any interesting insights (Brinkmann, 2014; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005), a semi-structured interview protocol was best suited for the phenomenological goals of our study. Thus, the interviewer would start the conversation by asking the respondent to list all the boxes they were subscribing to or had recently subscribed

TABLE 1 Respondent Details.

Name	Gender	Age	State	Profession	Subscription box(es)	Category (in order)	Interview mode	Interview duration (min)
Beatrice	F	39	WA	Marketing manager	Bokksu, HelloFresh, Wine Clubs	Food, food, wine	Zoom	25
Bella	F	46	TX	Medical business manager	Cheese subscription, Farmer's Dog, Firstleaf	Food, pets, wine	Zoom	33
Blake	M	38	NE	Instructional designer	Dollar Shave Club, Stitch Fix	Shaving, apparel	In-person	22
Calvin	M	21	NE	Undergraduate student	JackThreads, Trunk Club	Apparel, apparel	In-person	49
Danielle	F	40	DC	Sales enablement	BarkBox, Birchbox, Craft Kitsune, Imperfect Foods, KONG Box, SimplyCook	Pets, cosmetics, crafts, food, pets, food	Zoom	57
Daphne	F	27	NE	Marketing manager	Ipsy, Stitch Fix	Cosmetics, apparel	In-person	50
Eliza	F	51	NE	Library director	Bountiful Baskets	Food	Phone	41
Fennella	F	24	NE	Pharmaceutical Sales	Adventure Box, NatureBox	Games, food	Phone	49
Kevin	M	28	IL	Cosmetics sales manager	Birchbox	Cosmetics	Phone	42
Larissa	F	52	NE	Health services	Bulu Box	Health	In-person	48
Liliana	F	22	OH	Undergraduate student	Ipsy	Cosmetics	Phone	40
Melanie	F	43	CO	Communication director	Allure Beauty Box, HelloFresh, Stitch Fix, thredUP	Cosmetics, food, apparel, apparel	Zoom	48
Nell	F	31	MI	Make-up Artist	Birchbox, ipsy	Personal care, cosmetics	Phone	32
Nick	M	45	WA	Patent agent	CatLadyBox, Loot Crate	Pets, pop culture	Zoom	39
Nicole ^a	F	29	AZ	Doctoral student	Stitch Fix	Apparel	Phone	73
Noelle	F	32	NE	Assistant professor	BarkBox, Stitch Fix	Pets, apparel	In-person	41
Nola	F	21	NE	Undergraduate student	Birchbox, Ipsy	Personal care, cosmetics	In-person	33
Sandra	F	71	OH	Freelance proofreader	Annie's Kit Clubs, Fat Quarter Club, Home Chef	Crafts, food, food	Zoom	53
Stan	M	43	TX	Assistant professor	Cheese subscription, Farmer's Dog, Firstleaf	Food, pets, wine	Zoom	33
Tessa	F	26	MI	Undergraduate student	Buddhibox, Ipsy	Health, cosmetics	Phone	32
Vanessa	F	66	CO	Retired	Chewy, HelloFresh, Cream subscription, Sunscreen subscription	Pets, food, personal care, personal care	Zoom	37
Vani ^b	F	44	CO	Assistant professor	HelloFresh	Food	Zoom	23
Wilma ^b	F	47	CA	Business management executive	Clothing subscription, Farm Fresh to You, L'Occitane's subscription	Apparel, food, personal care	Zoom	34
Zadie	F	38	CO	Secretary	HelloFresh, PetMeds, St. Tropica	Food, pets, health	Zoom	25
Zara	F	40	PA	Portfolio project manager	Chewy, HelloFresh, Il Makiage	Pets, food, cosmetics	Phone	62
Zelda	F	34	NE	Pharmacist	Ipsy, Stitch Fix	cosmetics, apparel	In-person	65

^aHispanic.^bSouth Asian.

to. This was followed by a deeper discussion regarding each box. Initial questions were broader, asking the respondent to describe the logistics and contents of the box (product category, frequency, price, etc.). Later questions focused more on factors that shaped their decision-making in starting the subscription, continuing with it, and, wherever applicable, terminating it. Although respondents largely directed the conversation, specific probes were used wherever necessary to elicit relevant details and accounts of memorable experiences. All interviews were recorded for transcription and subsequent analyses. Our approach yielded richly detailed respondent accounts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002) that were collectively sufficient in providing a wealth of information about the subscription box experience. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached (as described in the next section) and our themes could accommodate the data successfully.

3.2 | Data analysis

Interview transcripts formed the central corpus for data analysis that were conducted using the NVivo 12 software package due to its flexibility in organizing and analyzing data (Sinkovics, 2016; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). All transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12, and all authors read and reread each transcript to gain familiarity with the data. As the overall goal was to acquire a phenomenological understanding of the subscription box experience, the analytical process was inductive with themes emerging from the data itself. Analyses primarily focused on extracting the common essence of the focal phenomenon from the variety of individual subscription box experiences reflected in respondent accounts. The idea of partitioning the subscription box experience into three stages arose early in the analytical process as they were consistently seen across all accounts regardless of the specific box(es) that respondents talked about. The names of these stages—initiation, immersion, and egression—were eventually finalized based on the consumption stream metaphor that emerged during discussions among the authors as subscribers could be seen as entering, remaining in, and leaving a steady stream of products delivered to them. Blocks of text from each respondent account were then assigned to the respective stage they referred to for subsequent rounds of coding and theme development.

Coding was conducted independently by two authors, starting with open coding—assigning relevant respondent quotes to categories with descriptive labels known as open codes—followed by axial coding—organizing open codes into higher-order themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2016). All authors periodically convened to compare individual interpretations of data and emerging themes, and to resolve any disagreements that emerged. In line with best practices for exploratory qualitative research, labels for all themes were jointly chosen based on their ability to depict a specific aspect of the customer experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sharp & Sanders, 2019). The overall analytical process was iterative, representing a recursive movement between parts of the data and the emerging themes, and adhered closely to the constant comparative method

(Spiggle, 1994). Each respondent account (the part) was read and reread multiple times and was additionally reviewed later in juxtaposition with the overall set of themes (the whole) as we developed the processual framework (Thompson et al., 1990). The use of NVivo was especially helpful in this regard as it allows for quick comparison between different respondent accounts, easy renaming of codes and themes, and flexible reorganization of thematic categories over multiple rounds of analyses.

As our objective was to develop a phenomenological understanding of the subscription box customer journey, we relied on the idea of theoretical completeness (Saunders et al., 2018) to determine when to end data collection. In line with this approach, all authors agreed that saturation was reached when our three-stage framework was able to accommodate all thematic categories into a cohesive whole, provide a reliable theoretical account of the experience of utilitarian and hedonic value during each stage of the subscription box customer journey, and no new insights were gained from additional data (Charmaz, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

4 | FINDINGS

We introduce the metaphor of consumption streams to illustrate the three key decision stages in subscription box customer journeys. We argue that a subscription box customer journey comprises a regular flow of products from retailers to customers and that customers can choose to enter this stream when they sign up, remain immersed in it as long as they continue subscribing, and then leave it when they terminate the subscription.

4.1 | Initiation: Entering a consumption stream

Respondent accounts reflected three key themes that played a role in consumers deciding to sign up for subscription boxes. Broadly, consumers chose to start their journeys with one or more subscription boxes because they were looking for solutions to a problem, seeking enjoyable indulgences, or exploring personal interests.

4.1.1 | Boxes as solutions

Respondents often signed up for a subscription box if it could provide a solution to a consumption problem. This was commonly seen in replenishment subscriptions wherein the same product would be shipped to consumers at regular intervals. Given that such boxes often dealt with day-to-day essentials, such regularity was a key inducement for consumers:

“I put [Date Lady] date sugar on a subscription two days ago. You can get it in some stores like Whole Foods but sometimes...you just forget! And I realize,

since I'm using a lot of it, why not just put it [on subscription]?"

[Wilma, Date Lady]

"It helps you stay on track with replacing your razor which people are bad about doing sometimes. And I have sensitive skin on my neck so if I don't replace my razors regularly I start getting red bumps all over. That's really the value that it adds for me, good razors!"

[Blake, Dollar Shave Club]

Along with such convenience, other examples of solution-seeking behavior came from consumers who looked for subscription boxes to address a specific issue they were facing such as Zadie who started subscribing to hair vitamins:

"After I had my daughter, I had horrible postpartum hair loss. And a friend of mine, she had some hair damage, so she started St. Tropica and absolutely loved it! They're an all-natural, one vitamin [sic] that has all your vitamins B, C, D. And my hair, I mean, you could tell it looked healthier. It had probably grown an inch or so!"

[Zadie, St. Tropica]

4.1.2 | Boxes as indulgences

Compared to the relatively more utilitarian nature of the first theme, the second theme that emerged centered on the hedonic enjoyment promised by some boxes. A key way that boxes served to increase enjoyment was by delivering an experience of luxury or indulgence as seen in the following examples:

"Even though I don't need [the cosmetic box], I just liked the idea of it. Even if I get one or two products that I really use, it's still well worth the cost...it just makes me feel rich, I guess! Because I have these super expensive products that other people are out there spending \$80 or \$100 on, and I can get it for the equivalent of \$4. Even when I'm by myself in my house using it, I feel fancy, and I feel like it's a luxury experience."

[Melanie, Allure]

"This is kind of a splurge item, it's not something that I need. It's more of a 'want' time. I might go shopping for clothes because I need clothes to wear, or I might go grocery shopping for food because I need food to live for sustenance. But this is like a splurge item, something I definitely don't need but it's fun and exciting and something I enjoy."

[Kevin, BirchBox]

In other cases, this was due to the sensory appeal of the products, such as Beatrice who enjoyed the treats that came in her box:

"It's a little box, 10 inches by 10 inches, maybe 6 inches deep. Inside are a whole bunch of snacks or treats from Japan specifically. So, you're looking at sweet treats, you're looking at a mix of savory treats and all of that stuff. All pure Japanese snack food!"

[Beatrice, Bokksu]

Liliana, similarly, loved the "bright colors" and "perfume smells like floral and beach spray" that came as part of her last Ipsy box containing a bunch of "summery items."

4.1.3 | Boxes as adventures

For some consumers, the decision to take the plunge and sign up for one or more boxes was rooted in their interest in certain product categories that either piqued their curiosity or which they wished to explore in greater depth. This motivation to adventure into new terrain to expand their knowledge and experience was seen in several examples of curation subscriptions:

"The original intent of getting [the food box] was to broaden our food horizons. We wanted to make sure we were introducing [their daughter] to a whole bunch of different foods...I also curate the options to make sure that there's at least one new thing in every single box that we can try. It's also a push on [her husband] to try more things."

[Beatrice, HelloFresh]

"I wanted to [subscribe] because you could get uncommon fruits and vegetables like kumquats, dragon fruits, stuff that's not really all that exotic but isn't in my normal grocery store. So, I'm trying new things every week!"

[Danielle, Imperfect Foods]

For some consumers, the surprise element further heightened their willingness to try out new things:

"I do like the fact that I don't really know what's in there because otherwise I would probably have said no to a whole bunch of items that I ended up keeping and liking. I like the fact that I don't know what's in the box as I want to see what they come up with."

[Noelle, StichFix]

These three themes reflect Fennell (1978) model of product-use situations that describe how consumers are driven by different concerns when making product-related purchase decisions. The boxes-

as-solutions theme highlights how customers derive utilitarian value from boxes that help them resolve “an existing problem that must be dealt with” (Fennell, 1978, p. 41). In contrast, the boxes-as-indulgences and boxes-as-adventures themes illustrate the hedonic value of subscription boxes. The examples for indulgence reflect how a subscription box can provide an “opportunity for enjoyment of sensory pleasure,” where the enjoyment is frequently “an end in itself” (Fennell, 1978, p. 42). In a related vein, the examples for adventures reflect how customers sign up for subscription boxes motivated by “fun, novelty, [and] the acquisition of information and expertise” (Fennell, 1978, p. 42), in line with a desire to broaden one's horizons. Collectively, these three themes support and help extend prior work focused on utilitarian and hedonic reasons for signing up for subscription boxes (Bray et al., 2021; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018; Tao & Xu, 2018). Next, we discuss the factors that influence customers to continue with their subscriptions.

4.2 | Immersion: Continuing in a consumption stream

When it comes to continuing with one or more subscription boxes, respondent accounts highlighted three key themes that play a favorable role in making that decision: the degree of match between customer expectations and the actual experience, evidence of responsive customer service, and provision of suitable incentives.

4.2.1 | Experiential match

Before receiving a subscription box, most consumers are unlikely to have an exact idea about what to expect. Regardless of whether the box is surprise-themed or not, the physical elements of the box—the size, shape, packing materials, item sizes etc.—vary a lot. Thus, the first theme for immersion is characterized by the degree to which the actual experience of receiving the box matches customer expectations, as seen in the following examples:

“BarkBox has a unique approach to toys. Each month is a specific theme and they're usually very punny, so full of puns! For some reason, this does it for me. I love the themes! I absolutely love the creativity that they put into everything. My pet store nearby [has] got no shortage of toys but they're not as creative, they're not quite as fun.”

[Danielle, BarkBox]

“We've gotten some really good recipes off of it. We've picked up some decent recipes for Tex-Mex, which was okay. It's got a little bit of a heat, but my husband hates spice, so that's perfectly up our alley.”

[Beatrice, HelloFresh]

For other consumers, surprise itself was the key as it added a dash of excitement and intrigue to their day-to-day lives and kept things interesting:

“It was fun to get a [surprise] package! I knew who it was from, but I didn't know what was in it. Just the surprise of opening your mailbox and you find the package in there ... the physical box! And saying, ‘Oh, my Birchbox is here!’ So, I get excited about getting a li'l present. I just like the idea that there's some unknown little thing to open.”

[Larissa, BirchBox]

Kevin concurred with this sentiment, noting how “the surprise is the main reason” why he and other consumers like him continue subscribing to boxes like BirchBox and Ipsy because they “don't know what they are going to encounter” in each box.

4.2.2 | Retailer responsiveness

Compared to regular purchases, where consumers exercise a high degree of control about purchase decisions (e.g., product choice, willingness to pay, or store selection), continuing with a subscription box service often involves delegating several decisions to a retailer. For several respondents, therefore, it was common to see the retailer and customer working together to fine-tune different aspects of the subscription box experience. Consequently, the second theme reflects the degree to which retailers were perceived to be responsive to customer concerns with several respondents noting how the quality of customer service was often key to their decision to continue:

“Initially we went with their [the retailer's] recommendations. But after about three or four days, I was like, no, it's too little food. We needed to adjust it...So, we called them and said, ‘Hey, can we adjust it?’ There was still a little bit of confusion, but they were very, very responsive. So, I appreciate that. I can get a hold of someone very easily by text, by phone, or by email. So, super responsive, super customer-centric!”

[Bella, Farmer's Dog]

“Once I got a few bags, you can go in...and say whether you want more of that type of product. And, like, eye shadows and eye liners, I was getting a lot of those...so I just told them to not send me those anymore and focus more on other products. So now I'm receiving less make-up and trying more skin and hair care products.”

[Zelda, Ipsy]

Other instances came from respondents who appreciated the proactive attitude of the retailer's customer service team in addressing occasional unavoidable issues:

“One time I received a bag, and one item was missing. It was just gone. The mailer wasn't opened or anything. So, I mailed them, and they took care of it right away which was impressive. Within 24 hours they had refunded me and sent my stuff out so that was something negative that, you know, turned around positive really quickly!”

[Tessa, Ipsy]

4.2.3 | Customer incentivization

Respondents mentioned how incentives would influence their decision to renew their ongoing subscriptions. Sales promotions, therefore, were often key in getting consumers to remain immersed in the stream as they increased the perceived value of the subscription box experience, as seen in these examples:

“Last month I got \$5 off. And then they'll send random things if you do a survey. For May, they were gonna give me 20% off. If you go on Google and give [them] a review, I think that one was 15% off. And if you put up a picture of your hair too, then 20% off. So, there's that little bit that makes you feel like you're getting something extra.”

[Zadie, St. Tropicca]

“The fee, to start with, was 10 dollars per month but then...you get the option to renew for an additional three months but you'd have to pay only 3.50 dollars a month. So, it cuts it way back. So, right away I signed up for my 6 months! [laughs]”

[Larissa, Bulubox]

In other cases, the discounted nature of the products helped maintain the perception that customers were getting substantial value from continuing with a box:

“I pay \$23 a month. And usually, the value, it's usually five to seven products and they value around \$250. So even though it's not something I would buy for myself, just the fact that I'm getting a really good deal is enough to make me wanna keep getting them.”

[Melanie, Allure]

The theme of experiential match simultaneously applies to utilitarian and hedonic value as the concept was seen in respondent accounts of replenishment boxes (that are frequently prized for their utilitarian benefits such as convenience) as well as accounts of

curation boxes (that offer hedonically appealing elements like novelty and variety). In contrast, the themes for retailer responsiveness and customer incentivization primarily reflect the utilitarian value that consumers frequently derive during their subscription box journeys. While helpful and responsive customer service aids in making the subscription experience more hassle-free and convenient, promotional incentives (via savings or perks) impact the perceived price customers must pay to continue with a box. Together, they augment the utilitarian value of the subscription box experience. Our findings also build on prior work looking at the role of product quality, price, self-concept alignment, and emotions in continuing intentions (Bray et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2020; Savary & Dhar, 2020; Xu, 2020) by illustrating the key underlying themes that shape consumers' decisions to stay immersed in a stream. With that background, we now turn to the final stage when customers choose to end their subscription box journey.

4.3 | Egression: Leaving a consumption stream

The final set of four themes illustrate the factors that came into play when customers decided to exit the consumption stream. Broadly, respondents recalled ending their subscriptions because the overall experience did not turn out to be (or stopped being) in line with their preexisting expectations, their excitement with the experience started waning, products started accumulating, or other marketplace avenues emerged for purchasing products.

4.3.1 | Experiential mismatch

Analogous to how a high degree of experiential match was a key factor in customers deciding to continue with a subscription box, the lack of such a match often became a reason for customers to exit the consumption stream. In some cases, there was a discrepancy between the anticipated experience and the actual experience from the start because the contents of the box did not match the respondent's taste:

“The products weren't really what I needed because many of them were exercise-type products supposed to enhance your ability to run. And I'm not exercising! On the other hand, there were some geared towards weight control I didn't like. It just wasn't a good match with my lifestyle and my tastes.”

[Noelle, Bulubox]

“I think they try to do what is fashionable in the season...and that's just not me. I like to wear the same T-shirts that are very simple, and I like to wear my comfy shorts or pants and that's all I wear. Or I like to pick out my own dresses but I'm very precise...it's a whole thing. I'm super picky – like I'm so picky with my clothes!”

[Daphne, Stitch Fix]

In other cases, we saw such a mismatch creep in with time as respondents observed the contents of the box gradually shifting away from their preferences:

“When I first started getting Ipsy it was a lot of really high-end good quality products that I really liked but towards the end it was really low-quality products – brands I hadn’t heard of, but not in a good way. So, I stopped [because] the products I was getting weren’t as nice as the ones prior. I was getting stuff that didn’t really match my preferences.”

[Nell, Ipsy]

4.3.2 | Gradual fade out

A second theme we noticed was linked to the hedonic adaptation that occurred over time as subscribers became used to receiving boxes and the experience stopped embodying the same excitement and joy that it used to. In some cases, the exit was temporary as the respondent indicated they wished to get back to it after a while:

“I reached a point where I just wasn’t quite as excited to get that box. So, yeah, fading’s a good way to put it! It’s like, ‘Oh, here’s some more different protein drinks,’ and even though they weren’t the same ones I wasn’t quite as excited. And then I’ve been off it for a while and I’m thinking, ‘You know, I might give it a try again.’”

[Larissa, Bulubox]

In other cases, however, the exit was permanent because the customer appeared to have exhausted the enjoyment that could be derived from the box:

“I think it’s a delicate balance. If you’re basing your marketing on a surprise system it must continue to be surprising. And while they eventually would add a couple of snacks every now and then, I just didn’t feel like I was getting anything new after a while. So, when it became ‘not new,’ it started getting a little disappointing. I think it had just been there too long [in my life]. I had tried all their snacks that I felt like I wanted to try.”

[Fennella, Naturebox]

Nell also agreed with that sentiment, noting that while she used to be “so excited” about receiving her Ipsy bag every month, over time “the excitement wears off because you know you’re gonna get it.”

4.3.3 | Product stockpiling

A key reason behind several respondents ending their subscriptions was that they started running into space constraints. Even though

many subscription box retailers allow adjusting shipment frequency, there were many cases where customers simply were not able to get through the items from one box before the next one arrived:

“And so, they just didn’t stop, and we had hundreds of pretzels in our freezer! We would eat maybe one and then we’d get another box of 14 and it became almost an anger thing where I was like, ‘It’s pretzels everywhere! We’re just drowning in pretzels!’”

[Melanie, Eastern Standard Provisions]

“It came every 60 days. They would send the night cream and the cleanser and then the day cream or whatever. But it got to where it was too much. I mean, my gosh, how much cream am I supposed to use?! I’ve got four drawers and now you’re getting ready to send me. So, I just called and said, ‘I’m done, no more!’”

[Vanessa, Unspecified Personal Care Box]

Danielle, similarly, mentioned that she was going to cancel one of her pet boxes because both her dogs were overweight, and she had “treats piling up” all over the house.

4.3.4 | Market alternatives

The final theme reflects how easy access to other market avenues can lead customers to end their subscriptions as they can now find the products they want through more traditional retail channels:

“[I will cancel] most likely in the next two months. And that’s mostly because the farmers’ markets are starting to open up and if [respondent’s daughter] gets vaccinated, I’d rather take her out to a farmers’ market than get a delivery of food. The experience of going out and shopping with her at the farmers’ market would beat the convenience.”

[Beatrice, HelloFresh]

“But then if [Chewy] starts getting out of control price-wise, then I will probably just shop for dog food whenever I’m at my daughter’s. She has two Costcos! Or if I’m up at son’s, then I will just buy there if it gets outta control price-wise.”

[Vanessa, Chewy]

As very little scholarly work research has focused on egression, only the theme of experiential mismatch is echoed in prior work on how surprise subscription boxes can sometimes backfire if the surprise is negative (Gupta et al., 2020). In contrast, other themes are relatively new though some parallels—the idea of consumers developing box fatigue, for instance—are seen in practitioner writings (Thomas, 2022). Continuing with the logic expressed in the previous section regarding the experiential match theme, we contend that the

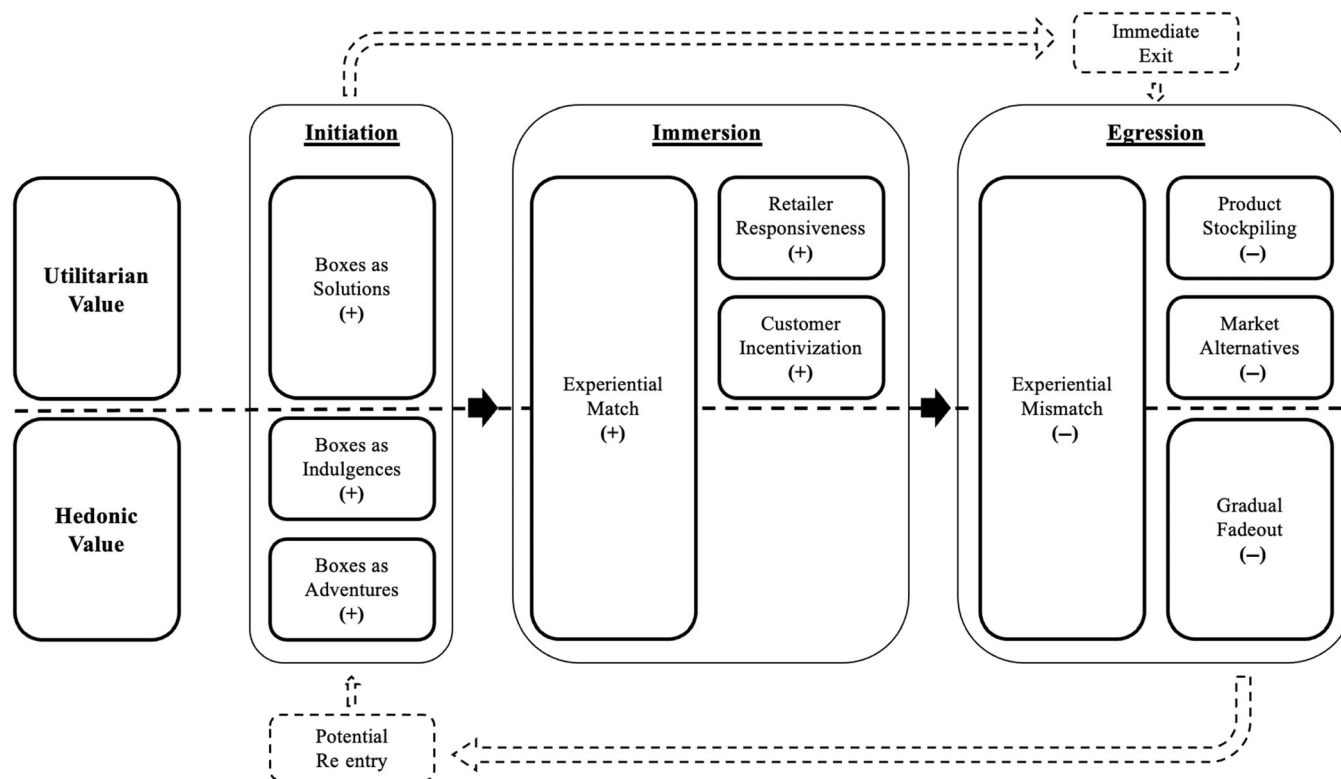


FIGURE 1 Utilitarian and hedonic value across the subscription box customer journey.

theme of experiential mismatch negatively impacts utilitarian and hedonic value. Consumers may realize that a box is not the solution that they were hoping for (thereby taking away from its utilitarian value), or that it does not provide the enjoyment or discovery that they were seeking (thereby detracting from its hedonic value). Gradual fadeout, in comparison, reflects a decrease in the hedonic value of boxes, especially those that tend to use surprise, novelty, and variety as key selling points. Such fadeout reflects hedonic satiation which can often occur when there is repeated consumption of a product (Coombs & Avrunin, 1977; Redden, 2008). Finally, product stockpiling and the emergence of viable market alternatives reflects the negative impact of external factors on the utilitarian value derived from subscription boxes. As respondent accounts show, consumers experience frustration and inconvenience when they start running out of space to store box contents. Similarly, the relative utilitarian value of subscription boxes is lowered if it becomes easier to acquire certain products via alternative market avenues. Both themes, therefore, show a reduction in the utilitarian value that often leads consumers to cancel their subscriptions.

5 | A UTILITARIAN-HEDONIC PERSPECTIVE ON SUBSCRIPTION BOX CUSTOMER JOURNEYS

Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic representation of the three stages of the subscription box customer journey along with a depiction of

whether each theme adds to or subtracts from the utilitarian and/or hedonic value of the subscription box experience (as denoted by the + and – signs placed in parentheses below each theme).

Consumers can be motivated to enter the consumption streams of subscription boxes because they provide utilitarian and hedonic value to varying degrees. A box can provide a utilitarian solution to a specific problem they might be facing and/or provide sensory pleasures, enjoyable indulgences, adventurous prospects, and opportunities to explore new products. Their decision to remain immersed, in turn, is guided by three themes: the degree to which the subscription box continues to provide a consumption experience that matches their expectations, the extent to which retailers are responsive to their complaints, and the attractiveness of sales promotions that retailers offer to keep them engaged. While experiential match can equally add to the utilitarian and hedonic value of a box depending on the extent to which the consumer is seeking either or both as part of the subscription box experience, prompt customer service and well-designed incentives serve to boost the utilitarian appeal of boxes via greater convenience and monetary savings. Finally, consumers choose to exit the stream due to different customer-level and market-level factors. Some leave if the experience stops matching up to their expectations while others leave because the initial excitement fades away. Others end their subscriptions due to stockpiling as their pace of consumption is much slower than the delivery frequency, while others switch to purchasing from different retail outlets. While experiential mismatch can subtract from the perceived utilitarian or hedonic value of a box if the consumer feels that the actual experience falls

short of expectations, the gradual fading out of excitement represents a hedonic loss. In comparison, product stockpiling and the emergence of other viable channels for acquiring products collectively represent a loss in utilitarian value as the subscription box experience either becomes difficult to manage or starts to be seen as less convenient when compared with other market options.

We note two additional possibilities in our framework: immediate exit and potential reentry. Immediate exits are likely to happen early if a consumer realizes that a box is an instant mismatch. An example of this came from Nicole, who ended her Stitchfix subscription after the second box because the products she received were a huge (and expensive) disappointment. Simultaneously, our conceptualization also allows for potential reentry as consumers always have the option to resubscribe if circumstances change. Larissa provided one such example as she resubscribed to Bulubox after a one-year hiatus. Some other respondents also mentioned being open to the possibility of signing up for a box again if they felt like repeating the consumption experience. Given the themes we find, we contend that reentry could be motivated by reasons that are relatively utilitarian (e.g., receiving a large discount for signing up again or a change in life circumstances that leads a consumer to seek out the convenience promised by a particular type of subscription box such as a meal kit) and/or relatively hedonic (e.g., a consumer deciding to sign up again for a cosmetics or apparel subscription because they want to explore new products or brands after not doing so for a while). The consumption stream, in any case, is always going to be there (provided the subscription box firm is still in business) waiting for the consumer should they choose to return, just as a stream does not dry up when someone leaves the water. With this, we turn to the contributions and implications that stem from our findings.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

6.1 | Theoretical contributions

Our research makes three key contributions to marketing theory. First, it extends prior work on how consumers consider utilitarian and hedonic value when signing up for subscription boxes (Bhatt et al., 2021; Bray et al., 2021; Hasan & Liu, 2020; Kerschbaumer et al., 2023) by showing how a similar focus also guides their decisions when continuing with or terminating a subscription. Our themes help illustrate how customer experiences of utilitarian and/or hedonic value can be boosted or diminished over the course of the subscription box customer journey. Moreover, as our insights are drawn from a large variety of subscription box experiences, our processual framework subsumes idiosyncratic differences between subscription box experiences and can parsimoniously accommodate different experiences as all subscribers encounter initiation, immersion, and egression as part of their journeys. While we acknowledge that not every theme is likely to be reflected in every subscription box customer journey, the overall framework provides a sufficiently robust foundation to guide future inquiry into the topic.

Second, we add to work within marketing research that has adopted a utilitarian–hedonic perspective when studying customer journeys (e.g., Ponsignon, 2023; Siebert et al., 2020; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2020; Tueanrat et al., 2021b). In contrast to research that has looked at utilitarian and hedonic journeys separately (Li et al., 2020), our findings complement relatively recent work that advocates looking at utilitarian and value together when studying customer journeys (Ponsignon, 2023; Siebert et al., 2020). The importance of doing so is further highlighted as we see how the factors that add to or subtract from the utilitarian and hedonic value of the subscription box experience differ depending on the specific decision stage of the journey. Consequently, rather than focusing on the same set of utilitarian and hedonic factors across all stages of the customer journey, our findings argue in favor of a more selective consideration of only those utilitarian or hedonic factors that are relevant at each stage.

Third, at a broader level our findings add to the considerable body of work that has accumulated on the customer journey concept over the past decade within marketing literature (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Tueanrat et al., 2021a). As several scholars have noted the continuing need to understand the factors that lead customers to continue or discontinue their journeys (Court et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Siebert et al., 2020), our findings take a step forward in that direction by highlighting the key themes that influence customer decisions to start, continue with, and end subscription box journeys. Finally, by foregrounding the narrative accounts of subscribers spanning all three stages of the subscription box experience, our study adopts a customer perspective when looking at the impact of utilitarian and hedonic value at each of those stages in line with the need to unearth fresh insights regarding “specific elements of the customer experience...[that] combine to influence the customer at different points in the journey” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 85).

6.2 | Managerial implications

Our findings can be used by subscription box retailers to improve the customer journey by trying to maximize increases in value during the first two stages (initiation and immersion) and preventing decreases wherever possible in the third stage (egression).

In terms of initiation, offering functional solutions can increase utilitarian value while fostering enjoyable and adventurous experiences can enhance hedonic value for customers. In line with the former, retailers can emphasize how their boxes are more convenient than other market offerings for meeting customer needs more efficiently and effectively. They could do so by highlighting the utilitarian benefits of the products or service-related features such as free shipping or customizable delivery schedules. Regarding the latter, retailers can highlight the pleasurable aspects of subscriptions (e.g., surprise, indulgence, or self-care) or their adventurous aspects (e.g., novelty, variety, and discovery).

For the immersion stage, retailers should keep a close eye on providing an experiential match in line with customer expectations and

preferences as such a match can enhance utilitarian as well as hedonic value. Monitoring box contents and logistics, seeking feedback from new and continuing customers, and allowing customers to make adjustments in line with their needs and preferences can be helpful in this regard. Given that different customer segments may value different combinations of utilitarian and hedonic value, retailers may also choose to tailor their focus depending on the key sources of value for each segment, prioritizing utilitarian or hedonic value if needed. Additionally, as responsiveness adds to utilitarian value in this stage, retailers should ensure adequate staffing and operational mechanisms to be responsive to customer issues as a lack of responsiveness could result in premature cancellations and lost patronage. Similarly, retailers should develop a promotional strategy with timely and personalized offers sent to customers based on their usage habits to boost the utilitarian value from such incentives.

Finally, when it comes to egression, retailers can try to calibrate product quantities or facilitate platforms for customers to exchange any excess or unwanted items. This would help prevent the perceived reduction in utilitarian value that customers experience when box contents start piling up in their living spaces. Retailers might also invest in market research that can alert them to the emergence of other market avenues against which they may have to position themselves in the future. That could help sidestep a potential decline in utilitarian value, which could otherwise trigger customer exits. Finally, the longer retailers can maintain a consistent degree of novelty and variety when it comes to the box contents, the longer they might be able to delay the hedonic satiation experienced with the gradual fade out of enjoyment from the subscription box experience.

6.3 | Limitations and future research directions

While our findings expand current theoretical and managerial understanding by adopting a utilitarian–hedonic perspective to provide a three-stage framework for subscription box customer journeys, the study has some limitations that future research could address. First, given our qualitative approach, it is not possible to get an idea about the relative strength of the utilitarian and hedonic value represented by our themes. To that end, experimental and survey research could investigate whether certain themes are more influential in others when shaping customer decisions to start, renew, or terminate their subscriptions. Such research could also help in identifying differences between customer-level factors (e.g., seeking solutions, indulgences, or adventure) and retailer-level factors (e.g., service provision or incentive design) in terms of their impact at the relevant stage of the customer journey. Second, it would also be useful to explore the potential differences between the subscription box consumption habits of different groups of people. We know that subscription rates tend to be higher among younger consumers and women, and among people who are employed full-time or have a higher household income (Bray et al., 2021; Kovacheva et al., 2022; Woo & Ramkumar, 2018). Future research could explore whether there are differences amongst age cohorts (e.g., baby boomers, Generation Z,

millennials, Generation Z, etc.) in terms of the degree to which they seek utilitarian and hedonic value from their subscription box experiences. Third, as our research focused solely on subscription boxes, another avenue for future work would be to look at other platforms that use the subscription commerce model such as streaming services (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, or Spotify) or publications (e.g., New York Times, The Guardian, or Readers' Digest). It would be instructive to see which themes come into play for these intangible and/or experiential types of subscriptions when compared with the tangibility of subscription boxes. Finally, while subscription boxes are a global phenomenon, we were only able to interview American respondents. Future research could look at the behavior of subscription box users in different countries to better understand how geographic and cultural factors impact the subscription box experience for such customers.

7 | CONCLUSION

Our central goal with this research was to adopt a utilitarian–hedonic perspective on subscription box customer journeys to develop a processual account of the three key decision stages customers encounter during the subscription box experience. As we have shown through our findings, such journeys can be visualized as consumption streams (comprising steady flows of products from retailers to customers) that customers can enter, remain immersed in as long as the experience is satisfactory, and exit when the perceived utilitarian and hedonic value from the experience falls below expectations. Moreover, as our insights are drawn from a large variety of subscription box experiences, our processual framework has the advantage of not being limited to a particular type of subscription box. Thus, we contribute to existing marketing literature on subscription box consumption, the experience of utilitarian and hedonic value in customer journeys, and the factors that shape customer decisions to continue or discontinue their journeys (Baek & Kim, 2022; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Ponsignon, 2023). Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of our work provide a useful roadmap for future scholars interested in this topic and marketing practitioners who can use our insights to develop and manage successful subscription box customer journeys.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon reasonable request and discussion with the authors.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing for this interview. I appreciate you taking the time to help me in my research and I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts. Before we begin, let me reassure you that our discussion will remain completely confidential. If you have no objection, I will record our interview so that I can transcribe it later. I won't disclose your personal identity to anyone as I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name. So, please feel comfortable speaking freely, especially as there are no wrong answers to any of the questions. As part of my research, I'm interested in learning more about your experience with subscription boxes.

I would like to start by asking you about which box/boxes you subscribe to or have done so within the last 6 months.

[For each subscription box mentioned by the respondent:]

- What products do you receive as part of that box?
- How often do you receive a box? Can you change that if you wanted?
- What is the payment system involved? How flexible is it?
- Do you receive any updates when a box gets shipped? Any other logistical details that you would like to share.
- What prompted the decision to sign up for this box?
 - Could you elaborate more on that?
- Do you remember the very first time you received it?
 - Could you elaborate on what that experience was like?
- Can you recall the last one you received?

- Could you elaborate on what that experience was like?
- Is there a particularly positive or negative experience you would like to share?
 - Could you share what made it so positive or negative?

[For current subscriptions:]

- Are there any particular factors that keep you continuing with this box? Do you see yourself continuing to use the box in the future?

[For past subscriptions:]

- What prompted you to cancel the box? Do you think you would go back to it?

[Closing questions]

- Are there any boxes that you have considered subscribing to but have not done so yet?
 - If yes, could you share what is keeping you from subscribing?
- Any other thoughts before we close the interview?

Thank you! Your views are extremely valuable, and I am very glad that you agreed to participate. If there are any other people whom you would like to recommend for this interview I would be more than happy to get in touch with them.

Thank you again for your time!