

UK LEVEL 6 — UNDERGRADUATE FINAL YEAR



Consumer Behaviour Case Study: Understanding the Subscription Coffee Consumer

A Critical Application of Consumer Behaviour Theory — Case: MindFuel Coffee Ltd

MODULE CODE	MKT3015
MODULE TITLE	Consumer Behaviour
ASSIGNMENT TYPE	Case Study
ACADEMIC LEVEL	UK Level 6 (Undergraduate Final Year)
TARGET GRADE	Distinction — 70%+
WORD COUNT	Approximately 1,500 words (excl. references)
REFERENCING STYLE	Harvard (UK)
CASE ENTITY	MindFuel Coffee Ltd (Fictitious)
DATE	July 2026
PREPARED BY	AssignProSolution.com

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CORE THEORIES APPLIED IN THIS CASE STUDY

☐ **MOTIVATION**

Maslow (1954) Hierarchy of Needs — applied to premium coffee consumption and identity.

☐ **DECISION-MAKING**

Engel, Kollat & Blackwell (1968) EKB Model — 5-stage consumer purchase process.

☐ **INVOLVEMENT**

Zaichkowsky (1985) — high vs low involvement and implications for subscription inertia.

☕ **HABIT LOOP**

Duhigg (2012) — cue–routine–reward cycle and morning coffee ritual behaviour.

□Approx. 1,500 words | Distinction Level | UK Level 6 Final Year

1. INTRODUCTION AND CASE CONTEXT

Consumer behaviour — the study of the processes through which individuals select, purchase, use and dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires (Solomon et al., 2022) — is foundational to effective marketing strategy. Understanding *why* consumers behave as they do, rather than merely *what* they purchase, enables marketers to design genuinely resonant propositions and communications. This case study applies core consumer behaviour theories to **MindFuel Coffee Ltd**, a fictitious UK direct-to-consumer specialty coffee subscription brand delivering curated single-origin roasts to 28,000 subscribers (£19.99–£34.99/month). MindFuel's target consumer — the 28–42-year-old remote-working professional who treats coffee as both a productivity tool and a ritual of self-care — provides a rich context for applying motivation theory, the EKB decision-making model, involvement theory, habit formation and social influence frameworks.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

Consumer behaviour scholarship draws from psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology to construct explanatory and predictive models of purchase behaviour. For this case study, four interconnected theoretical lenses are applied: Maslow's (1954) motivational hierarchy illuminates the higher-order needs driving premium coffee purchase; the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model (1968) maps the decision journey from need recognition to post-purchase evaluation; Zaichkowsky's (1985) involvement continuum explains the paradox of subscription inertia in what is ostensibly a low-cost product category; and Duhigg's (2012) habit loop framework explains the neurological and behavioural mechanisms that convert considered purchases into

automatic loyalty. These theories are not applied in isolation — their explanatory power lies precisely in their interaction, as motivation shapes involvement, involvement shapes decision-making depth, and repeated decisions crystallise into habit.

3. CONSUMER MOTIVATION: MASLOW APPLIED TO PREMIUM COFFEE

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs proposes that human motivation operates hierarchically — physiological needs must be substantially met before higher-order psychological needs become motivationally active. Applied to consumer behaviour, the framework explains why consumers pay a significant premium for products that deliver higher-order need satisfaction beyond functional utility (Blythe, 2013). MindFuel's pricing — up to £34.99 per month for specialty single-origin coffee available in supermarkets for a fraction of the price — cannot be explained by functional need alone.

For MindFuel's core subscriber, coffee consumption operates simultaneously at three levels of Maslow's hierarchy. At the **physiological** level, caffeine addresses the biological drive for wakefulness and cognitive performance — the baseline entry point. At the **esteem** level, drinking specialty single-origin Ethiopian Yirgacheffe or Guatemalan Huehuetenango signals connoisseurship, discernment and professional sophistication — what Belk (1988, p. 139) describes as the use of possessions to "extend, confirm or question our identities." For the remote-working professional, high-quality coffee at their home workstation is a tangible marker of professional self-image, particularly when shared via Instagram or described in workplace conversation. At the **self-actualisation** level, MindFuel's accompanying tasting notes, roaster stories and origin documentaries engage the subscriber's desire for learning, sensory exploration and authentic cultural connection — what Pine and Gilmore (1998) identify as the "experience economy" value layer that commands premium pricing.

Critically, Maslow's hierarchy has been challenged for its cultural specificity and rigid sequencing (Wahba and Bridwell, 1976). Cross-cultural consumer behaviour research demonstrates that in collectivist

cultures, social belonging may motivate consumption before esteem needs emerge — a limitation relevant to MindFuel's international growth aspirations but less constraining within its UK-focused AB demographic core.

4. THE CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

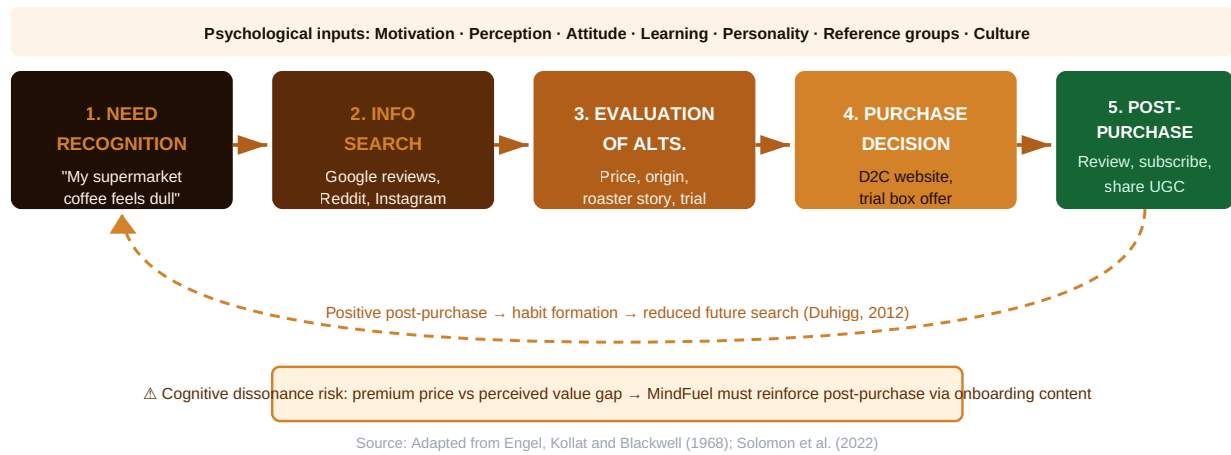


Figure 1: The EKB Consumer Decision-Making Model Applied to MindFuel Coffee Ltd Subscription Purchase. The feedback loop indicates how positive post-purchase experience reduces information search in subsequent purchase cycles, accelerating habit formation. Source: Adapted from Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968) and Solomon et al. (2022, p. 330). All examples are fictitious.

The EKB model (Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, 1968) provides a structured lens for understanding how MindFuel's prospective subscriber progresses from recognising dissatisfaction with commodity coffee to committing to a premium subscription. A critical observation, however, is that this journey is not as linear as the model implies. Kahneman's (2011) dual-process theory identifies two modes of cognition: System 1 (fast, automatic, emotion-driven) and System 2 (slow, deliberate, analytical). For MindFuel, the *initial* subscription decision likely activates System 2 — the relatively high monthly commitment (£19.99–£34.99) and perceived switching complexity from a habitual supermarket purchase triggers deliberate evaluation. However, subsequent renewals are predominantly System 1 decisions: once the subscription is established, the default action (continuation) requires no active re-evaluation, and Samuelson and Zeckhauser's (1988) status quo bias ensures that inertia heavily favours retention — a commercially vital insight for MindFuel's subscription model.

The evaluation stage is particularly significant for MindFuel's marketing strategy. Fishbein's (1967) multi-attribute attitude model proposes that

consumers evaluate alternatives across salient attributes, weighted by importance. For MindFuel's target consumer, the highest-weighted attributes are likely to be: origin transparency and roaster provenance (ethical signal); flavour complexity and tasting note accuracy (connoisseurship signal); and delivery flexibility (risk-reduction). Price, counter-intuitively, functions as a *quality signal* rather than a barrier — consistent with Zeithaml's (1988) finding that consumers in premium categories use price as a heuristic for quality when objective quality evaluation is cognitively demanding.

5. INVOLVEMENT THEORY AND SUBSCRIPTION BEHAVIOUR

Table 1: Consumer Involvement Continuum Applied to MindFuel Coffee Ltd — Marketing Implications

Dimension	Low Involvement (Commodity Coffee)	High Involvement (MindFuel Subscription)	MindFuel Strategic Implication
Decision process	Habitual/routine; minimal search	Extended problem-solving; multi-source search	Rich pre-purchase content (blog, YouTube) addresses high-involvement search behaviour
Information processing	Peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986); brand recognition	Central route; argument quality matters	Claims must be substantiated (tasting notes, certifications, roaster credentials)
Price sensitivity	HIGH — cost is primary decision criterion	LOW — quality and values dominate	Premium pricing reinforces quality signal; avoid discounting core subscription
Brand switching	HIGH — minimal loyalty; price-driven switching	LOW — emotional attachment; switching costs perceived as high	Onboarding investment converts initial high- involvement decision into low- involvement habit
Post-purchase cognition	Minimal; no dissonance	Moderate cognitive dissonance risk post-sign- up	Immediate onboarding email reducing dissonance: confirm quality credentials, community welcome
Social dimension	Low — supermarket coffee not socially salient	HIGH — coffee connoisseurship is identity-expressive	UGC programme, community features and shareable unboxing experiences amplify social value

Source: Adapted from Zaichkowsky (1985); Petty and Cacioppo (1986). All applications are fictitious educational illustrations.

Zaichkowsky (1985, p. 342) defines involvement as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests." Table 1 reveals a strategically important paradox: while commodity coffee is a low-involvement product, MindFuel's subscription reframes the category as high-involvement through identity expression, connoisseurship and community membership. This involvement elevation is commercially powerful — it converts a category

characterised by price competition and switching into one governed by emotional loyalty and perceived switching costs. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) predicts that high-involvement consumers process persuasive messages via the *central route*, scrutinising argument quality and factual claims rather than responding to peripheral cues like celebrity endorsement or attractive packaging alone. MindFuel's marketing communications must therefore prioritise substantive, credible content — roaster biographies, cupping score transparency, fair-trade certification evidence — over aspirational imagery alone.

6. HABIT FORMATION AND THE RITUAL COFFEE CONSUMER

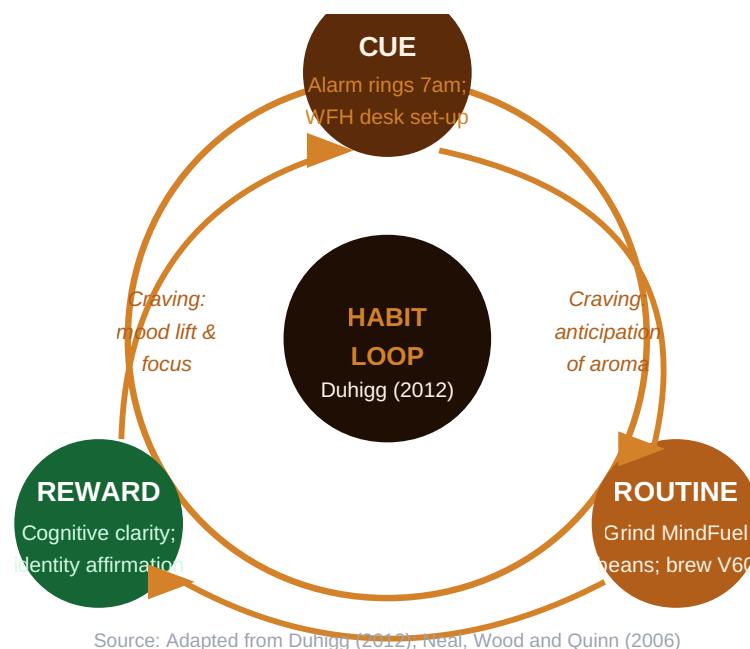


Figure 2: The Habit Loop Applied to MindFuel Coffee Subscription Consumer Behaviour. The cue-routine-reward cycle, once established, operates largely outside conscious deliberation (System 1, Kahneman, 2011), driving subscription retention through behavioural lock-in rather than active re-evaluation. Source: Adapted from Duhigg (2012, p. 19) and Neal, Wood and Quinn (2006). All examples are fictitious.

Duhigg (2012) identifies the neurological habit loop — comprising a cue, a routine and a reward — as the structural mechanism by which repeated behaviours become automatic. As Figure 2 illustrates, MindFuel's subscribers who have successfully established a morning coffee ritual are operating primarily within this habit loop: the cue (alarm, desk set-up) automatically triggers the routine (grinding and brewing MindFuel beans), which delivers the reward (cognitive clarity, identity affirmation as a connoisseur). Neal, Wood and Quinn (2006, p. 198) confirm that "habits are triggered automatically, without intention

or conscious deliberation" when contextual cues are stable — precisely the condition provided by the invariant morning work routine of the remote professional.

The marketing implication is strategically significant: the primary threat to MindFuel's subscriber retention is not competitor quality but *contextual disruption* of the habit loop — holidays, workplace returns or household changes that break the morning ritual cue. MindFuel's CRM strategy should therefore include contextual re-engagement triggers (e.g., "Working from home this week? Your beans are ready" push notifications) and subscription pause options that preserve the subscriber relationship through disrupted periods, preventing full cancellation.

7. SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND EWOM IN COFFEE DISCOVERY

Reference group theory (Bearden and Etzel, 1982) posits that consumers use the attitudes, behaviours and opinions of socially significant others as standards for evaluating their own consumption choices. For MindFuel, two reference group influences are particularly operative. **Informational influence** — where consumers seek expert knowledge to reduce purchase uncertainty — is mediated primarily through online communities: Reddit's r/Coffee (2.1m members), specialty coffee YouTube channels and Instagram accounts function as aspirational reference groups, exposing the consideration consumer to specialty coffee terminology, equipment and brands before any commercial touchpoint is reached. **Normative influence** operates within the consumer's immediate social network: when a colleague or peer mentions their MindFuel subscription, the product gains social proof and status signal simultaneously.

"People do not buy goods and services. They buy relations, stories and magic."

— Godin (2009, p. 1)

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) — "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people

via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39) — is a critical acquisition driver for MindFuel. Cheung and Thadani (2012) demonstrate that eWOM impact is moderated by source credibility, review volume and valence: MindFuel's 4.8-star average across 3,200 Trustpilot reviews (fictitious) provides high-volume, high-valence social proof that substantially reduces perceived purchase risk during the information search stage of the EKB model. Critically, Doh and Hwang (2009) find a non-linear relationship between negative review proportion and credibility: a small proportion of negative reviews (3-5%) *increases* perceived review authenticity and overall credibility — suggesting MindFuel should resist any temptation to suppress critical feedback.

8. CONCLUSION AND MARKETING RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study has applied four interlocking consumer behaviour theories to MindFuel Coffee Ltd, revealing a nuanced picture of the specialty coffee subscriber. Maslow's hierarchy explains the higher-order need satisfaction that justifies premium pricing; the EKB model maps the decision journey while exposing cognitive dissonance risk at the post-purchase stage; involvement theory reveals MindFuel's strategic advantage in reframing a low-involvement commodity through identity and community; and the habit loop framework explains the neurological mechanism that converts initial high-involvement decisions into durable automatic loyalty. The central analytical insight is that MindFuel's commercial success depends not on winning the initial subscription decision — though that matters — but on successfully triggering and embedding the morning coffee ritual as a stable, context-dependent habit within its subscribers' daily lives.

MARKETING RECOMMENDATIONS — MINDFUEL COFFEE LTD

1. **Invest in post-purchase dissonance reduction:** Deploy a five-email onboarding sequence within the first 72 hours of subscription — confirming roaster credentials, delivering the first tasting guide and welcoming subscribers to the MindFuel community — to close the Fishbein attitude-behaviour gap and prevent early churn.

2. **Engineer the habit cue actively:** Provide subscribers with physical cue anchors — a branded coffee card on the grinder, a morning ritual guide — to strengthen the environmental cue structure that Duhigg (2012) identifies as essential for habit formation beyond the first month.
3. **Leverage high-involvement search behaviour through authoritative content:** Commission a YouTube series (roaster origin visits, brew method masterclasses) and long-form blog content addressing the central-route information needs of the high-involvement subscriber, building SEO authority and reducing reliance on paid acquisition.
4. **Design a structured eWOM amplification programme:** Following positive post-purchase experiences (identified via NPS survey at Day 14), automatically invite satisfied subscribers to leave Trustpilot reviews and share their first-box unboxing on Instagram, providing a branded hashtag and community recognition — turning Maslow's esteem-level satisfaction into referral acquisition.

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