

The Consumer in a Connected World

Editorial / Introduction to Special Issue

John Deighton, Jacob Goldenberg, and Andrew T. Stephen

The call for papers for this special issue of the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research began with this vignette: “A street scene in New York, Shanghai or Moscow today differs from the same scene in 2005 in one particular respect: today most of the pedestrians, some of the cyclists, and a few automobile drivers have their heads down, their eyes on mobile phone screens. They are reading, texting, navigating, tinding, hailing a cab, or, for all we know, adjusting their home thermostats. They are living in a state of connection to people and things inconceivable a decade before. When they leave the public sphere and enter the private, connectivity continues. They tweet while watching television, talk back to advertising. The state of connection is ubiquitous, with the phone the first thing people check in the morning, and most sleeping with it within arm’s reach. The devices that connect people also track them, complicating the blessing with elements of a curse.”

The vignette was intended to give context to this issue’s topic. Among the many technologies that have revolutionized marketing and consumer behavior over the last decade, mobile communications technologies, along with social media and other “connected” software and services run on mobile devices, have reinforced each other to radically change how people live their lives. Importantly, the notion of leading an interconnected life has taken on a broader, larger-scale, and much more complex meaning than it had in earlier technological eras.

For most of human evolution, to be connected to other people meant being in their direct line of sight. Then perhaps 2,500 years ago, we started writing to each other, widening the footprint of connectedness. Subsequent technologies have deepened the footprint, but they have all delivered episodic connectivity among people at fixed locations, usually by speech or writing.

Now, quite abruptly in one decade, we are no longer location-bound, and our connections are not obliged to be episodic, even when we are separated by distance. Two billion people with smartphones live with the power to find each other and, with mutual consent, to follow each other at just about all times, and 1.86 billion use, at least once a month, the social grids that ride on Facebook (Facebook 2016.) No-one anywhere with a mobile phone is out of reach, indeed out of sight, except voluntarily. The world has become smaller, information has become visible, and it disseminates in the speed of light.

However the fundamental properties of social behavior that account for social network structure appear not to have changed much over this span of time (consider the connected cave man graph presented by Watts (1999) in his general exploration of the conditions under which a small world can arise in any kind of network.) What, then, are the effects of the digitally connected world on social networks? The main effects are probably visibility, speed and convenience. Absent such technology it was more difficult to create a meaningful social tie than it is today. Consequently networks had to have higher diameter (and lower density) than today. A person’s increasing average degree (the number of connections to other people) through the digital social activity decreased the diameter (and increased the density), and made information dissemination faster.

How is society, and how are markets, responding? This special issue of the JACR invited research to investigate this fundamental question, which we believe is one of the more important questions of our time, with broad-reaching implications for individuals, organizations, and public institutions. The articles in this special issue cover a range of aspects of consumer life related to the technology-enabled connections that consumers can now have.

One topic covered is *how mobile device usage impacts individuals and generates new kinds of data*. New modes of communication, such as mobile devices, create new sites for decorous and indecorous behavior, new kinds of etiquette and transgression, and have perhaps unexpected impacts on their consumers. Ward, Duke, Gneezy, and Bos considered how the mere presence of one's mobile device—even if it is facing down or turned off—can affect a person's cognitive performance. Intriguingly, and perhaps troublingly, just having one's smartphone nearby when doing something unrelated can occupy a person's mental resources and reduce their cognitive capacity. Fortunately, Ward and colleagues propose a simple solution: allocating time to be away from one's mobile device. Meredith and Roberts explore how people respond to what Roberts and David (2016) call "phubbing" (phone snubbing), which is, "to be snubbed by someone using their cellphone when in your company." They find that when a person is phubbed during a face-to-face encounter they feel a sense of social exclusion which leads to a heightened need for attention. Perhaps paradoxically, the snubbed person responds to the need for attention not by engaging directly with the snubber, but by turning to social media in hopes of regaining a sense of inclusion more broadly. Finally, Cooke and Zubcsek consider how mobile devices can be used for consumer research purposes. They describe approaches for using smartphones to collect consumer data, including through behavioral experiments and surveys, and consider how the additional capabilities these devices have (e.g., geolocation) could be useful to researchers as new kinds of data.

Another topic addressed in this issue is *new ways of thinking about consumer connectivity in business*. Martineau and Arsel looked at this in the context of consumer-based co-creation communities. They sought to understand the types of consumers who are part of co-creation communities, such as Threadless (an apparel company that crowd-sources apparel designs), and how the presence of these types affects success or failure of these collaboration-based businesses. Interestingly, they find that the presence of multiple types of consumers is critical for success. Trusov and Joshi introduce the concept of "media virality" where they consider and empirically model not the virality of specific messages but instead consider virality of media channels in a complex system of media where information spreads not only in one channel but also across channels. They apply their approach to the context of movie stars, and show how marketers can consider the media virality of their brands and products, not just the virality of their messages and content in social media. Lastly, Hoffman, Novak, and Kang explore how using social media platforms, specifically Facebook, to do things that are not highly social (e.g., reading news) can still lead to people feeling a sense of connection. They point out how this is important for brands, since Facebook (and other social media platforms) tend to be frequently used as marketing communications channels with content that might not feel particularly "social" in nature but could still engender a sense of connection under the right conditions (the right fit of promotion vs prevention focus).

The final topic addressed is *interesting new findings in social communication*. Moore and McFerran approach this from a consumer behavior perspective, looking at consumer word-of-mouth (WOM) messages and the language they use. Specifically, they consider the interesting and prevalent

phenomenon of linguistic mimicry in the context of online WOM. Their findings shed light on how subtle differences in how consumers say things in WOM depend on interpersonal similarities, and levels of mimicry can have, under certain conditions, negative consequences for engagement in WOM exchanges in the future. Finally, Fossen, Andrews, and Schweidel consider online WOM that spreads via social connections from a macro perspective. They contrast two potential drivers of diffusion in the context of social media conversations, geographic proximity and socio-demographic proximity, and find that the latter (i.e., interpersonal similarity) is a critical driver.

This topic is new, very wide and requires often an interdisciplinary approach: Indeed, the articles in this issue use a wide range of methods and offer a diverse set of findings. This is important, since it clearly indicates both the breadth and depth of consumer research when it comes to understanding modern notions of connectivity. The phenomena studied, such as collaborative and interconnected business models, social media, digitally enabled WOM, and virality, are complex, multifaceted, and still-emerging phenomena. Varied approaches and perspectives are most important when this is the case.

We expect it to continue to be the case given that notions of consumer connectivity, particularly associated with technology, continue to evolve. New technologies and platforms keep on coming, and although some might initially baffle consumers and managers alike (remember when Snapchat was confusing and the punchline of many jokes?), many ultimately rise to prominence and warrant rigorous inquiry. This means that there will always be interesting new phenomena to study in the context of technology-enabled consumer connectivity.

References

Facebook Investor Relations Website (2016) <https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2017/Facebook-Reports-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2016-Results/default.aspx>

Roberts, James A. and Meredith E. David (2016), "My life has become a major distraction from my cellphone: Partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among romantic partners," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 134-41.

Watts, Duncan J (1999), "Networks, Dynamics, and the Small World Phenomenon." *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 105, Issue 2 (Sep.) 493-527.