Web 2.0, Social Media, and Creative Consumers: Special Issue

The field of consumer behavior has traditionally studied how consumers make purchasing decisions, individually, or in groups. Scholars who researched the consumer as individual typically considered the consumer as largely a passive recipient of the products, services, and messages of marketers. They received the communication of firms and presumably changed their attitudes, but did not really communicate back. Their sole purpose in acquiring offerings as instruments of need satisfaction was consumption—in most instances, they had no innate desire to be radically creative with these offerings, or to modify or tinker with them in any way.

Scholars who studied consumers in groups began at a micro-level, and considered the family and its influence on consumer decision making, before moving on to small reference groups, larger societal groups such as communities, and eventually to sub-cultures and cultures at a macro, national level. The emphasis in much of the research was on decision-making roles in smaller groups, such as the family, and on the effects of norms and cultural values on the consumption of goods and services in the case of larger groups. Less attention has been given to the way consumers network in these settings, interact, or communicate with each other.

Developments in social technologies under the broad banner of Web 2.0 have led to a sea change in the way consumers relate to both the communication and offerings of organizations and also to the ways in which they interact and communicate with each other in groups. Clary Shirkey in his book *Cognitive Surplus* (2010) talks about how social technologies are changing the way society works and in this consumers, enabling loose collaboration and the taking advantage of a society's cognitive surplus. Although some influential individuals, notably the "father" of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, have been skeptical, "I think Web 2.0 is, of course, a piece of jargon, nobody even knows what it means" (Laningham, 2006), Web 2.0 has placed two phenomena into over-drive: social media and the notion of the creative consumer.

Social media such as blogs and micro-blogs, social networks, and video and picture sharing platforms enabled by Web 2.0 technologies are profound in that they afford consumers a much broader and digitally mediated extrinsic environment through which consumer experiences occur. Consumer researchers will need to add knowledge of this type of social behavior to their arsenals, along with all the existing knowledge of intrinsic variables such as motivation, learning, and attitudes. The extrinsic consumer environment is now also more identifiable and measureable through digital social networks and communities added to the existing assemblages of family, references groups, communities, and cultures.

In addition to changing where and how our social interaction occurs, social media have also turned consumers into active communicators and creators of content, accelerating the creative consumer phenomenon (Berthon *et al.*, 2007; Muñiz and Schau, 2007). Consumers are no longer the passive recipients of the communications and offerings of marketers. At one level, they create content—they blog, add comments and contents to social network discussions, and perhaps contribute reviews and evaluations to product forums. However, at an extreme level, they have even begun to assume, and in many cases take over, the tasks (such as the "4 P's") traditionally associated with marketers. Their "distribution" of legitimate and pirated recordings has changed the music industry. Their indications of value by both posting and reacting to prices on forums such as eBay and Craigslist have made them pricing decision makers as much as many marketers are. No longer the passive recipients of advertising messages, consumers now create ads about the brands they love and hate and use video sharing sites such as YouTube to broadcast these. These consumer-generated advertisements (CGAs) are often the receipt of more attention than the professional efforts of conventional marketers and at a substantially lower cost. Consumers are both creating and destroying value by hacking, modifying, changing, and repurposing the proprietary offerings of organizations and then sharing and broadcasting this knowledge across a range of social media.

The tables have turned. Most marketers have assumed that technology would give them power over consumers by using all the information that had been gathered and processed on these consumers. However, the opposite is occurring. As Deighton and Kornfeld (2007) argue, "it's the consumer who runs the show for the most part, not the marketer—in fact, forget the 'consumer' label altogether." From a consumer research perspective, there is now a need to study the consumer as an active force in markets, rather than as a passive recipient of messages and offerings. Scholars and practitioners alike require knowledge of this creative consumer beyond the intrinsic properties that have been the focus of past research. Likewise, we need to understand the consumers as social animals who interact, integrate, and network in identifiable, measurable communities that transcend the narrower boundaries of families, reference groups, and cultures.

This Special Issue of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* attempts to address this research need. Our aim was to highlight research that examines the conditions for and consequences of the rise in social media and the behavior of the creative consumer. The call for papers attracted a number of submissions, and we would like to thank all those who submitted a manuscript for peer review as well as the reviewers who actively engaged in a constructive dialogue around each submission. We invited both reviewers and authors from a variety of backgrounds to contribute to this special issue given the research streams emerging on social media and creative consumerism.

We begin with a paper about consumer access to social media. With the rise in mobile technologies have come

changes in how and from where we access social media. The first paper by Heinrichs *et al.* examines the perceptions held of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube by a group of professional consumers, profiling their responses according to their mode of access to these sites. Their paper shows that differences exist between mobile, notebook, and desktop users of social networking sites in how they perceive their ease of use, usefulness, information quality, and feelings of enjoyment. These findings have implications for how we design these sites and also for how an organization using them needs to accommodate their social interaction accordingly.

The second paper explores more deeply the consumer motivations for social media use. Heinonen develops a conceptualization of social media activities derived from consumer narratives recorded in diaries by consumers. From this, Heinonen identifies 15 social media activities classified into three groups: information processing, entertainment, and social connection. This paper not only extends our understanding of what consumers are doing with and through social media but also demonstrates why consumers are not always as actively contributing to marketing content as we like to assume.

An important characteristic of the creative consumer is the behavior of sharing, creating, or co-creating content with others in our social media networks. The third and fourth papers in our special issue discuss this specifically. The third paper by Harvey *et al.* offers insight into the factors that affect consumer decisions to forward a viral YouTube video through social networks, testing claims in the literature on forwarding behavior and propagation or what makes a message "go viral." The authors show that the level of involvement a YouTube video generates in consumers is the main factor influencing viral success. This study provides early empirical evidence regarding the factors affecting forwarding of digital content across social media networks.

The fourth paper by Pehlivan *et al.* explores the digital voice of consumers—comments and conversations in discussion threads, generated from the viewing of CGAs. The authors examine consumer responses to both consumer-generated and firm-generated advertising to examine whether the source of the advertisement—who created it—is important in the digital conversations it generates. Using a text mining application, the authors analyze consumer comments to both types of advertisements for Apple's MacBook Air laptop, identifying different patterns between firm and consumer-generated advertising. This paper also shows how text mining of consumer comments and conversations in social media can provide deep and rich insight into consumer responses.

Social reference and member groups are a traditional area of consumer behavior research. However today, these are broadened to include social groups hosted within identifiable and measurable social media networks. This provides for opportunities to research social behavior and has resulted in emerging research methods such as netnography and natural experimentation for their examination. The last three papers of this special issue specifically examine social group behavior.

The fifth paper by Dennis and Harris examines the social influence of Facebook friend recommendations and retailer Facebook activities on social shopping behavior. Through focus groups with student consumers, the authors specifically examine retailer digital social activity and consumer responses. Despite initially displaying little interest in Facebook for shopping, what is interesting in this paper is how a slight "social nudge" from friends they trust resulted in students becoming more open to social e-shopping, a behavior many commented they did not realize they were actually participating in.

The paper by Grant *et al.* on the effects of an operatic flash mob on consumer arousal, connectedness, and emotion pushes and tests the boundaries of our conceptualization of what exactly social media are. Some observers, such as Bradley and McDonald (2011) of the Gartner Group, argue that "social media" is a bad term hindering progress—even the telephone, more than a 100 years old, is a social medium (and nowadays a digital one). They believe that a medium can be defined as "social" if it encourages the following: participation (mobilizes the masses to contribute); collectiveness (people must swarm to the effort); transparency (allows people to validate and organize content); independence (delivered any time, any place, any member collaboration); persistence (contributions must endure for scaled value, captured in a persistent state for others to view, share, and augment; members learn from, reference, and virally propagate the best content); and emergence (communities self-direct for greater productivity). The naturalistic field experiment of Grant *et al.* assessed the impact of operatic music on consumers' emotions and connectedness in three conditions: spontaneous live music (flash mob), recorded music, and no music. The results show that the flash mob enhanced consumer arousal, connectedness, and positive emotions as well as consumer-to-consumer social interaction.

Social media affords consumers ways to give and receive digital social support within groups not just on shopping but also on more serious life experiences. Ballantine and Stephensen discuss how Facebook Fan pages have become a way for consumers to share information and seek emotional support from each other. In their exploration and analysis of a Weight Watchers Facebook Fan page, the authors show how social support is both given and received through this group and the communication styles by which this occurs. They reveal three groups of social support consumers, each differing substantially in how they choose to participate and interact, despite sharing a common interest.

The creation of specific social networking sites around themes of member interest such as politics, computing, health, education, or specific firm-hosted sites is seeing the emergence of digital communities between communities and sub-communities within them. Our last paper by Liang and Scammon examines consumer behavior in a health social networking site. The authors discuss how it provides new opportunities for consumers to engage in word of mouth about specific medical-related and health-related issues. The authors analyze the discussion threads of a specific obesity group hosted within the site and identify how health social networking can benefit both active and passive participants through what the authors term reciprocal interaction with "similar others."

Despite current euphoria over the promise of social media and the potential for consumer action they provide, it is wise for marketing practitioners and consumer researchers alike to adopt a sober perspective on these social technologies. Like all technologies, from the wheel to the sequencing of the human genome, the consequences will be paradoxical (Mick and Fournier, 1998). Technologies are indifferent to the human condition, and their effects will always and simultaneously be both positive and negative. This admonishes practitioners to tread carefully in their enthusiasm to exploit and implement the tools while simultaneously alerting consumer researchers to a host of opportunities for future research.

The truth is that although social media have provided numerous opportunities for individuals to build, revisit, and exploit their social networks and indulge in the nostalgia that tracking down and communicating with old friends that the tools provide, they carry with them a raft of adverse effects. In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle (2011) notes that in these times, "insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time . . .We expect more from technology and less from each other."

Our thousands of followers on Twitter, and our vast networks of "friends" on Facebook, deceive us about our social circles, without imposing the demands of intimacy. We text each other, "like" and comment on our friends' status(es), and follow each other doggedly, and still do not talk to each other. Whether we want to be or not, we are aware of how the illusion of virtual intimacy degrades our real life experiences. Marketers who forget this will do so at their peril in the long term. Consumer researchers who study and understand it and the benefits social media might afford and in doing so begin to provide insights to the dilemmas, will not only contribute to practice and the advancement of theory but also actually help to make the world a better place.

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