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## Being Online: How the Internet is Changing Research for Consumers

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### ABSTRACT

The last ten years have seen significant change in consumers' lives; changes that are too numerous to document in one article. However, one change that has made, and continues to make, a difference to consumers' behaviour is their interaction with the Internet and Social Media. In this article I discuss the role that the Internet has played in consumers' lives as well as the importance of understanding consumers' interactions online. By being online, consumers are able to live experiences that are far different from their offline interactions. I close with some predictions for consumer welfare and online interaction as well as a look to the future of Research for Consumers.

### ARTICLE

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When I started to plan this paper, I was asked to think about the major advances in consumer research over the last 10 years. I was instantly and inextricably worried. How on earth would I be able to condense the major advances into one paper? Indeed, in my mind, an entire issue dedicated to the subject would not be enough. So rather than focus on everything, I thought it more prudent to focus on the areas that have impacted my own research since the inception of the Journal of Research for Consumers, 10 years ago. For me, to understand consumers and the needs of consumers, one cannot ignore the impact that the Internet and online technologies are playing in consumers' lives.

The phenomenal growth in the adoption of the Internet worldwide has been so significant that it appears to be changing almost every facet of our lives; from how we shop to how we find life partners. The Internet has been at the heart of changes and challenges as mundane as keeping in touch with friends to formulating, organizing and monitoring entire revolutions. The Internet not just allows us a portal for information and interaction, but a connection whereby self expression and representation can be enacted in a way that has not been experienced before. It is along this vein of thinking that this paper is written. That is, how do consumers use online technology to express themselves, present their identities and, ultimately, how can we, as researchers, aim to better understand consumers through their online behaviour?

Sociology, Psychology and Consumer Research are rich with research focusing on online representation. In particular, Barry Wellman's work on the offline/online divide challenged the nature of Internet use away from the Luddittical presupposition that the Internet will destroy offline social interaction (Wellman, Boase, and Chen 2002; Wellman et al. 2001; Wellman

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and Hampton 1999). Wellman shows in his plethora of research on the topic that societies were already changing and that the Internet was not necessarily an instigator of change, but rather a catalyst for accelerated change (Wellman et al. 2002). There continues to be evidence that our online self is simply extensions and reflection of our offline self (Schau and Gilly 2003); however, there is also the growing area of research showing how consumers' online selves are starting to diverge from their offline selves. For example, I showed in some recent research how consumers who feel stigmatized in their offline worlds were able to find acceptance and belonging by being a part of online communities (Veer 2010a, b). In this way, the offline and online worlds of the digitally connected consumer may no longer be different representations of the same self, but completely different characters living in completely different worlds with completely different social interactions (Veer 2010b). As such, as researchers, our focus shifts from understanding not just consumers' offline consumption patterns, but also their online consumption patterns and how the two are similar or divergent.

Rather than focus on how one is able to conduct research online, which is well documented by a number of different authors (see the following for some examples of papers explaining and applying netnographic methods: Kozinets 2002; Langer and Beckmann 2005; Veer 2010a, b, Forthcoming), this essay focuses more on why we, as researchers in pursuit of understanding consumers better, should consider the impact of online engagement in order to understand the lives of digitally savvy consumers.

### **Consumers Online**

Online consumption has evolved significantly since the Internet's inception. The early days of Online Consumption saw the Internet as a functional tool. There was significant emphasis on encouraging the adoption of this 'world changing' new technology (Venkatesh and Davis 2001), as well as how to break down the 'digital divide' between those who had access to the Internet and those who did not (Norris 2001). These are still key areas of investigation for research into consumer welfare as Internet access becomes entrenched into our daily lives, whilst others struggle to get even basic access. Other areas where further investigation can take place include the issues with regards to consumer trust and protection online, not just from scams and fraudulent access of information, but from predation and exploitation of vulnerable consumers. These are just a few of the many areas of online research where more work is needed and encouraged for publication in JRC.

My friends regularly comment on my purchasing behaviour as being remarkably cheap. I am that terrible person who walks into a retail store and asks all the difficult questions; I then test the item I want to purchase; I even try to haggle a good price; then I walk out and see if I can source it cheaper online...and I usually can. Does this make me a bad person or simply a savvy, digitally connected consumer? Perhaps if you spoke to my father, it would be the former; but talk to many young adults, it would be the latter. At what point does this then lead to a state of flux whereby the consumers and the producers of goods are both equally savvy offline and online? Kucuk and Maddux (2010) describe this type of 'Internet Free-Riding' behaviour as being detrimental to retailing, both online and offline. One could argue that retailers will raise their prices to compensate for free-riders, or one could argue that anything that empowers the consumer to achieve his/her needs is to be encouraged.

The Internet flagrantly encourages the blurring of morality. Some research has been done to combat this and encourage a more equitable balance between offline and online interactions, such as the PayPerPost case, recently published in JRC (Kucuk 2009). But, rather than dissuade these behaviours or find means by which companies can continue to make profits that could be potentially lost through online exchanges, I would argue that greater research as to how consumers react online and offline is needed. It could be that the old market

models of ownership rights, buyers and sellers and intellectual property are no longer adequate, and a greater acceptance of sharing as a dominant means of understanding exchange is more appropriate (Belk 2010).

I have not met with a door-to-door salesperson in over a decade, but my spam filter fills up every day as retailers come 'knocking' on my inbox's door. Toffler's fear of Information Overload in his book *Future Shock* is still pertinent 30+ years later (Toffler 1970). However, as consumers, we are managing this information in more communal and social ways. For example, when I went to purchase Toffler's book on Amazon.com I breezed through the editorial reviews and went straight to the consumers' reviews from those who had purchased and [presumably] read the book. I looked at Amazon's pretty yellow bar chart, I filtered the responses to see what the main objectors had against the book and within 15 minutes I had a pretty good idea as to whether it is something I would purchase. The use of word-of-mouth recommendations is not novel (c.f. Richins 1983); even in online settings, the concept has been discussed for a number of years (c.f. Dellarocas 2003). What is different today, compared with 10 years ago, is the ease in which consumers are able to access word-of-mouth recommendations and commentary, as well as how quickly consumers are able to become digital producers. In this way, consumers are able to warn others not to purchase items or evangelize the wonders of their new discovery. What is also novel is the trust we assume in total strangers, compared with the need for trust with offline word of mouth recommendations. The ease of navigation through the Netniverse means that for some consumers the online world has become a more easily traversable and understandable place to immerse one's self than the offline world, which is full of its social norms and cultural faux pas.

### **A Happier Life Online?**

With the offline world full of social norms that are meant to govern the proper order of society, there exists a growing group of consumers who are eager to break away from this order by engaging in purposefully dissident behaviour online. In a recent study, I looked at why some consumers are so drawn to online social media (Veer Forthcoming). In my work I looked at how Facebook was allowing its users the ability to stare into the lives of others without the fear of reprimand as staring is often considered socially unacceptable (Ellsworth, Carlsmith, and Henson 1972; Langer et al. 1976). The behaviour these users engaged in ranged from simple information gathering (without the consent of the other user) to exhibiting feelings of *Schadenfreude* as the users stared at their online friends' misery. One could argue that delighting in another's misery is completely reprehensible; but one could then equally argue that it is our right to be free to feel and do whatever we choose. The Internet is allowing consumers to do just this. Whether it is to incite violence, as in the case of the recent English riots, or to look at who your ex-partner is now dating, the Internet is opening up consumers' lives in a way that is becoming more and more alluring, especially to those who are finding the rigidity of the offline world overly restrictive.

Taking this line of thinking a step further, the hazards of unmoderated access to the Internet is not fully explored by consumer researchers, nor are these hazards completely understood by policymakers. Having unlimited access to everything the Internet has to offer can be seen as a blessing, but also a serious threat, especially to younger consumers. For example, Freeman-Longo (2000) describes how easily children and teens can access pornography online, offering a warped view of sex and sexuality as these sites rarely portray a realistic expression of intimacy. Bremer (2005) continues this vein of thinking with a look at the various advantages and disadvantages associated with children and the Internet. In particular, she looks at the huge risks of becoming victims of online/cyber bullying; the risk of being victims of online sexual predation; and even the possibility to financial loss as a result

of not fully understanding online e-commerce sites. The reality is that exposure to the Internet, unabated, can be dangerous, especially to vulnerable consumers such as children.

This allure to a different life online where the social norms are more fungible has led to some unforeseen consequences. For example, the proliferation of pro-ana sites (Shade 2003) has been shown to lead to a triggering effect in some sufferers, hindering any possible recovery (Bardone and Cass 2006). The elimination of taboo online allows consumers to gain information about any topic one wishes to investigate. Wikipedia even offers a 'how to' guide to committing suicide. The Internet has offered consumers such unlimited freedom of speech, expression and information that our traditional understanding of consumer knowledge, information and wisdom is being called into question. This all affects our ability, as researchers of consumers, to fully understand a digital consumer's life in completeness without an understanding of their online behaviour.

### **The Future of Research for Consumers**

I am not here to mandate a call for netnography. What I hope to express in this short piece is that consumers are changing and technology is facilitating that change. Without an understanding of such changes, we, as researchers of consumers and researchers for consumers, will struggle to keep pace with this change. In Charlie Chaplin's movie "The Great Dictator", he closes with a stirring speech that rang true in his time and perhaps rings truer today for the future of the Journal of Research for Consumers. I encourage all to watch the speech (it can be easily found on YouTube), but here's a short extract to ponder:

*We all want to help one another.  
Human beings are like that.  
We want to live by each other's happiness — not by each other's misery.  
We don't want to hate and despise one another...  
We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in.  
Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want.  
Our knowledge has made us cynical.  
Our cleverness, hard and unkind.  
We think too much and feel too little.  
More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness.  
Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost....  
The aeroplane and the radio have brought us closer together.  
The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men, cries out for universal brotherhood, for the unity of us all.  
Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world — millions of despairing men, women and little children — victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people.  
To those who can hear me, I say — do not despair.*

The world is changing. With the changing world its consumers are also changing. As researchers of and for consumers, we need to understand the lives of consumers in this changing world. Without adapting, we face the prospect of being irrelevant. Irrelevance is shortly followed by extinction. The Journal of Research for Consumers needs to maintain a balance of academic intrigue, rigor and insight; but this needs to be coupled with real world impact. This is my wish for the next 10 years of the Journal of Research for Consumers. Prof. Simone Pettigrew has done a fantastic job in marrying academia and relevance over the last 10 years. I can only hope that my tenure will continue to make the marriage stronger and, in time, an example for others to aspire to be like. I look forward to having you alongside me through this time of change.

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