Navigating the Networked Rivers of the Social Web: Emerging Themes For Consumer Behavior Research on Web 2.X

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Web 2.0 or the “social Web,” offers online consumers unprecedented opportunities to create and control their online experiences. The purpose of this proposed roundtable is to explore the emerging research implications of consumer behaviors in the social Web. Research topics are organized according to consumer creation, connection, consumption and control themes. Key objectives are to: 1) offer a new framework for organizing emerging consumer behavior research on the social Web research frontier, 2) expose interested ACR members to exciting research streams in this emerging area, and 3) generate insights and ideas that can serve as the basis for future collaborations among ACR members.

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ROUNDTABLE
Navigating the Networked Rivers of the Social Web: Emerging Themes for Consumer Behavior Research on Web 2.X

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In a little over a decade and a half, the consumer Internet has evolved from a few directories and online storefronts into a vast, sophisticated network of information stores that millions of people from around the globe interact with on a regular basis. As the Internet matures, it has moved from a static, rigid mechanism for data access into an operating system that seamlessly connects applications—and people—across the global network. Increasingly referred to by many as Web 2.0 or the “social Web,” this evolving Internet offers online consumers unprecedented opportunities to create and control their online experiences.

More than simply a set of features or applications, new social media forms (such as the social bookmarking site StumbleUpon or the micro blogging application Twitter) are contributing to the evolution of the Web as a social technologies platform that connects consumers in innovative ways with often startling implications for traditional marketing efforts. It is a profound fact that consumers are now both the producers and consumers of their own online content and services. The purpose of this proposed roundtable is to explore the emerging research implications of these social Web consumer behaviors.

The Early Internet–Flat and Static
In the early Web, let’s call it “Web 1.0,” consumers were required to navigate through relatively inflexible and often rigid online paths. Web 1.0 was a conduit for information, largely consisting of basic text and images. The basic infrastructure for online commerce was built in Web 1.0, in the form of static sites which evolved to include limited dynamic content and interactivity.

Web 2.0–A State of Mind
We are now witnessing Web 2.0, the next logical iteration of the Internet, where the Web is more of an operating system that facilitates sharing and participation. The seamless connection of Web 2.0+ applications and services such as the “mobile+social” dodgeball.com to track one’s friends’ current geographic locations and Zooomr for photosharing and text messaging in real-time has been referred to as the “mash-up” phase of the Internet with parts that connect (Markoff 2006). Rather than follow relatively inflexible paths and existing navigational structures, Web 2.0 consumers are more in control of their online navigational experiences and are more easily able to engage in only those applications that interest them. Web 2.0 is less about navigating through individual Web sites and more about Web-based applications and environments that can be installed and experienced as the consumer sees fit.

Web 3.0–It Can Think!
If Web 2.0 puts consumers in control, then Web 3.0 will augment that control and give it a brain. Web 3.0, sometimes called the “Semantic Web” (Berners-Lee, Hendler and Lassila 2001), is the next evolution of social networking technologies pioneered in Web 2.0. As the Web begins to “understand itself,” it becomes less of a catalog and more of a guide. This phase involves integration of artificial intelligence and the Web and involves human effort integrated across the network. Very early examples are Amazon’s Mechanical Turk Web service or Google’s Image Labeler game. Virtual Worlds like Second Life, where humans in avatar form serve as guides and mentors and answer questions well beyond the scope of today’s search and FAQ technology, provide a glimpse into what information search in the online world of the future may be like.
**FIGURE**

Emerging Social Web Research Themes Organized According to The “Four C’s of Online Consumer Behavior

Create: User Generated Content (individually created content)
- Community identity
- Posters vs. lurkers
- Social dynamics of posting behavior
- Word of mouth models

Create: User Generated Content (collaboratively created content)
- Collective consumer innovation (crowds, hives, mobs and swarms)
- “Community brands”
- Consumer-generated “ad” content in brand communities
- The spatial clickstream

Connect: Social Networks and Online Communities
- Creating value and making meaning in brand communities
- Peer-to-peer problem solving communities
- Social production
- Trust and value in firm-sponsored virtual communities vs organic virtual communities
- Value construction in exchange networks

Consume: Customer Experience
- Brand engagement
- Consumer engagement
- Consumption of performance
- Presence, Telepresence, and Flow

Control: Autonomous User
- Co-creation (brand engagement)
- Participatory advertising
- Personalization and Customization

**What is the Social Web?**

Some definitions may be useful. We define the social Web as consumers interacting with each other through Web 2.0+ based social media applications. The currency of interaction is user-generated content. Social media are Web-based applications that permit creation, sharing, manipulation and consumption of user-generated content. Social networking focuses on the nature of interactions among consumers within a specific category of social media applications–social networking sites.

**Roundtable Themes and Objectives**

The four C’s of online consumer experience (Hoffman and Novak 2009) serve as the organizing framework for the proposed roundtable research topics. As depicted in the Figure, social Web research topics are organized according to consumer creation, connection, consumption and control themes. Key objectives of this proposed roundtable are to: 1) offer a new framework for organizing emerging consumer behavior research on the social Web research frontier, 2) expose interested ACR members to exciting research streams in this emerging area, and 3) generate insights and ideas that can serve as the basis for future collaborations among ACR members.

A total of 19 ACR members, including the organizer, have committed to participate should this roundtable be accepted. These committed participants come from across the globe and run the gamut from assistant professors who have just completed their Ph.D.s on emerging social Web topics to well known academic experts with established reputations in online consumer behavior. As such, ACR attendees, as well as roundtable participants themselves, can expect to participate in a highly engaging roundtable discussion concerning the emerging social Web research themes.

We anticipate that the roundtable is likely to be of interest to a wide variety of consumer behavior researchers, including both “newbies” who are Web 2.X curious and experienced online consumer behavior researchers. Each roundtable participant has agreed to serve if the proposal is accepted.

**Pre-Conference Interaction Among Participants**

Roundtable participants will interact before the roundtable via email exchanges. These exchanges will culminate in a face-to-face dinner in Pittsburgh during the conference in advance of the roundtable, sponsored by the UCR Sloan Center for Internet Retailing.

**References**