The Paradox of Social Television: the Effects of Connectedness and Distraction on Enjoyment

Cansu Sogut, Boston University, USA
Frederic Brunel, Boston University, USA
Barbara Bickart, Boston University, USA
Susan Fournier, Boston University, USA

The use of social media to communicate with other viewers while watching television (social television) can increase or reduce enjoyment. When viewed content is affective, communication creates social connectedness, which enhances the overall experience. When viewed content is informational, social TV hinders the enjoyment of the content due to distraction.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social television (social TV) - the use of social media to communicate with other viewers while watching television - allows the sharing of experiences with close or distant others. People can share via live-tweeting, posting Facebook status updates, or reading other viewers’ comments (Nielsen 2014; Wagner 2013). In this paper, we examine how communicating online with other consumers while watching a television broadcast affects enjoyment of the viewing experience.

Broadcast networks have two major incentives to encourage social TV: (i) increasing engagement and word-of-mouth about the TV programs and (ii) bringing back traditional TV, where viewers are not able to fast-forward the commercials. These motives call broadcasters to action; yet, research on the downstream effects of social TV on viewing experiences shows conflicting results. While some industry research suggests that this behavior can increase program and brand engagement (Nielsen 2015; Russell 2012), other findings suggest that it might be distracting (Pearce 2014).

Our goal is to understand how the nature of TV consumption changes when people are engaging in social TV. Specifically, we examine the effects of social TV on (i) the enjoyment of the content and (ii) the enjoyment of the overall experience. Our theorizing suggests that social TV has both a positive effect on enjoyment via a feeling of social connectedness and a negative effect on enjoyment via distraction.

The positive outcomes of consuming experiences with social others suggest that the benefits may also extent to social TV. Thus, we predict that social TV will enhance the overall enjoyment of the consumption and this effect will be mediated by social connectedness.

Our hypothesis is based on the connections between (i) the felt synchrony with social others induced by viewers’ online communication (Sogut, Brunel, and Bickart 2015), (ii) people’s preference for social experiences (Caprariello and Reis 2013; Raghunathan and Corfman 2006; Ramanathan and McGill 2007), and (iii) the impact of social connectedness on well-being and positive emotions (Mauss et al. 2011).

Social TV requires multi-tasking as viewers need to use a second screen device (e.g., smartphones, tablets) while watching the program on TV. Thus, we predict that participating in social TV may also lead to distraction, which negatively affects the enjoyment of the content. We also predict that the effect of distraction on content enjoyment will depend on the type of the viewed content. On the one hand, communicating with others requires attentional resources, which may reduce consumers’ ability to process the program content. Experiences can be evaluated less favorably when attention is divided (e.g., Green and Brock 2000; Langer 1997). On the other hand, some findings suggest that distraction while watching TV does not necessarily make the experience less enjoyable, especially if the affective component (compared to the informational component) of the viewed content is dominant (Nelson et al. 2009; Shiv and Nowlis 2004). We present a two-component model, which predicts that distraction may decrease subsequent choices for the sampled item. The model asserts that the ultimate pleasure arising from the taste of a food sample depends on two components, one informational and the other affective. Further, the model proposes that distraction increases (decreases). Therefore, we predict that people will perceive participation in social TV as distracting when the viewed content is predominantly informational, but not if the viewed content is predominantly affective.

In two studies, we examined whether social TV affected overall experience enjoyment and viewed content enjoyment. In Study 1, participants watched a clip from a talent show (high affect), while in Study 2 they watched a clip from a documentary (high information). In both studies, we manipulated whether or not audience members participated in social TV while watching the clips. Lab sessions were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In the “TV + Social TV” condition participants watched the video while communicating with each other using a chat room interface, and in the “TV only” condition, they watched the video without communicating. In the TV + Social TV sessions, each participant was assigned an anonymous username and was instructed to share at least five posts in the chat room. After viewing the video, participants rated their enjoyment of the experience and enjoyment of the content. We also measured social connectedness and distraction.

In Study 1, where content was predominately affective, social TV enhanced experience enjoyment, which was driven by social connectedness. Further, regardless of engaging in communication, all participants enjoyed the clip equally. In other words, participating in social TV did not enhance or diminish the enjoyment of the intrinsically enjoyable content itself per se, but rather, enhanced the enjoyment of the overall experience for the participants.

In Study 2, where content was predominantly informational, we found that participating in social TV resulted in less enjoyment of the video content. Although social TV increased the felt connection with other audience members, the negative effect of distraction on content enjoyment was stronger than the positive effect of connectedness. For experience enjoyment, the effects of distraction and connectedness balanced each other out, resulting in no difference in overall experience enjoyment between the two conditions.

In two experiments, we find that participating in social TV (vs. TV only) increases social connectedness, which enhances the enjoyment of the overall experience. When social TV is not distracting, the positive effect of feeling connected to social others positively affects the overall experience. When communication leads to distraction (occurring when content is predominantly informational, rather than affective), social TV hinders the enjoyment of the viewed content.

Our work contributes to the literature on experiential and hedonic consumption by providing a theoretical framework that reconciles the paradox of social TV – the tension between connection and distraction. We believe that understanding the effect of social TV on different aspects of enjoyment also has important practical implications for content producers, broadcast networks, and advertisers. Specifically, content producers and advertisers should encourage online conversation among consumers, especially when the program content is emotional. When the content is mainly informational or requiring more attention, it might make more sense to encourage viewers to share their thoughts during the ad breaks rather than dur-
ing the program. Finally, because feeling connected enhances viewing experiences, promotions encouraging online conversation should also highlight the importance of being part of a group or community.

REFERENCES


