

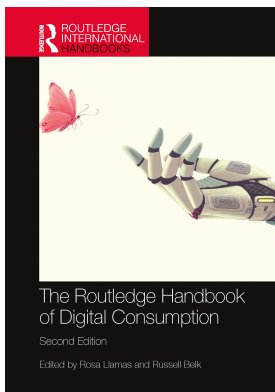
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## The Routledge Handbook of Digital Consumption

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### Living in a digital society

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# 1

# LIVING IN A DIGITAL SOCIETY

*Rosa Llamas and Russell Belk*

## **Evolution of the digital society**

Alexa is Claudia's study buddy. She helps her with her third-grade homework and answers all the questions that pop up in her curious mind. Alexa is always there for her, so they have become close friends. Hence, when Claudia's parents changed internet providers and they didn't have Wi-Fi for a day, the first thing that Claudia told Alexa (in a relieving tone) when she was back was: "Oh, Alexa, I've missed you a lot!"

Hector (an 8-year-old) is becoming an expert at origami, just by watching videos on YouTube. He also loves handcrafts and, again, YouTube is the finest instructor he can get. Claudia also feels an uncanny fascination for Japan; she is learning kanji and already has her own YouTube channel. Both Claudia and Hector not only consume, but also create digital content. Both were born after the publication of the first edition of this book. They were born in a digital society, and even though neither of them live in world-class cities, they both have a world of digital possibilities readily at hand, by the grace of the internet. For them, the internet is like electricity, a utility that has always been there.

Naturalness defines how such digital natives use the internet. Digitality has progressively permeated into more and more spheres of our everyday life during the last decade. Take for example Christine, who is taking care of a dog who needs six eye drops, two minutes apart. Guess "who" is helping keeping her on track. Yes, Alexa is in charge of that, too. Or take the fact that part of this chapter has been written during online co-working sessions where a group of professional women meet over Zoom twice a week, in order to work together, support each other, are accountable to each other, and move forward on their separate projects together.

This volume outlines the evolutionary changes that the digital age has experienced while entering into what seems like a more mature stage. In the decade since the first edition of this book (then titled the *Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption*), digital affordances and digital consumption have exploded in variety. Digital corporations that did not exist 30 years ago are now among the world's largest corporations, and their founders are among the world's wealthiest people. One of the traits of a digital society is that the digital is ubiquitous, permeating most spheres of our lives, conquering moments which were previously experienced in an analog fashion, like material menus, books, records, photos, and letters. In

the early stages of the digital age, digitality was an interesting novelty. Now, the consumer is digital full time and, in many cases, this is not optional. Nowadays, we need a digital device in order to read the menu in a restaurant, scan a QR code, or make an appointment with our doctor. The list of contexts where consumers need to use technology is endless and goes beyond what once was a digital service or a niche for geeks or techies. Even the most traditional companies and consumers are converting, working out their technological muscles.

During the burgeoning stages of the digital age, it was possible to draw a line between online and offline, but in the more mature digital age, the digital sneaks in everywhere, unless we purposefully set a boundary. In other words, nowadays, digital is the mode by default. The essence of everyday life is digital, not only in the first world, but increasingly in developing countries as well (e.g., Tenhunen 2018). Even the most traditional rituals, like having a meal, training, traveling, moments in nature, or intimate moments, are not devoid of a digital halo, most of the time orchestrated by a smartphone. In the first edition of this book, we cited Turkle's idea about technology becoming like a phantom limb (Turkle 2011), particularly for teenagers (Llamas and Belk 2013). Technologies, especially smartphones and other smart devices, as extensions of the physical self, have become commonplace. Instant messaging and taking photos and videos, posting on social media sites, and making digital "live streams", have become integrated into the most prosaic practices. "Snap/video or it didn't happen" seems to be the rationale behind these practices. Only what has been digitally communicated counts in the digital society. Our thumbs are more active and skilled than ever before, and technology has become the intruder that demands our constant vigilance and attention, making undivided attention an elusive utopia, while running out of battery can be considered as a total catastrophe.

Applications were already part of the digital life a decade ago, but in the current stage of the digital age, there are apps for everything the mind can conceive. What do you want? Whatever it is, there is an app for that. It seems there's nothing left analog, to the point that if it gets too much and we want to disconnect and counteract the technology take-over of our lives, well there's an app to help us do that too. These practices are not one-off events, but part of a digital lifestyle.

The moments when the digital is off and consumers are unplugged are elusive, and, for most of us, they no longer happen naturally. In response to the increasing hyperdigitalization, the conscious use of technology is becoming "a thing"; that is, it is getting hits. Still, some consumers resist the hypnotizing effect provided by digital devices as well as the seductive effect of the screens. There is a difference between consuming technology and being consumed by technology. Our mobile digital devices, in particular, hold the power to free us or enslave us (Llamas 2016). In the digital society, some may think that they cannot afford being away from posting and sharing on social media. Others think that the mindful use of technology involves opting out of digital entanglements, at least partially or temporarily. Following this formula, some brands have come to the rescue of the consumers, helping them to tame their technologies [e.g., Punkt has launched a mobile phone promoted as an un-smartphone aimed at facilitating mindful communication (Parsons 2018)].

In the early stages of the digital era, analog was mainstream and digital was the indie thing. Nowadays, it is the reverse; we are fully immersed in the digital and the analog has become a romanticized special hobby (Humayun and Belk 2020). Whether led by resistance and a rebel spirit, or by an effort to be different and indie, some consumers are turning to analog options. So, analog technology is making a comeback after having been totally swept out of the picture. It is the case of classic alarm clocks (which had been replaced by mobile phones) as well as analog cameras, vinyl records, and other non-digital media and devices.

There are also digital versions of analog products. This is the case of digital disposable cameras like Dispo. Being more present and living in the moment is the idea behind this app. The application has gained a lot of traction among teenage consumers. It takes pictures that can only be accessed once they are “developed,” which happens the next day at 9 am. There is no option for multiple shots, and the camera does not provide filters. Just a simulation of the old school way of photography on the latest mobile phone.

In earlier stages of the digital age, we were not concerned with fake news and election interference, only dimly aware of online surveillance, and our growing concession of our right to privacy had not yet gotten to the point of provoking consumer activism. But the digitization of the society has brought multiple crises like hacks of millions of “private” personal profiles, ransomware attacks demanding millions of dollars in Bitcoins, and Chinese social engineering of citizen behavior via ubiquitous surveillance, as well as concern about surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019).

### **Transformations in the digital society**

Technology has contributed to the empowerment of anonymous consumers. It provides them with channels, so they can potentially reach massive audiences. It also offers limitless possibilities to find their tribe across the planet. Whatever their interest, the internet provides them a platform to find communities of kinship. Consumers have an opportunity to become more independent from formal systems in a digital society while remaining more connected to peers. They can connect and make arrangements directly without intermediaries. There is a cornucopia of platforms which allow people to work independently and start their own businesses. Some sectors like self-publishing have skyrocketed in the last few years. Simultaneously, some new roles like virtual assistants are in high demand, and platforms like Etsy are reaching wide audiences. Many influencers were once anonymous consumers who by the grace of internet have now achieved the status of micro-celebrities and are followed by millions.

The emancipation from corporations, institutions, intermediaries, and traditional lifestyles is at the core of some projects to experience freedom in all spheres of life. Digital nomadism exemplifies this trend. The digital society is not attached to brick and mortar places and static locations; instead, it dwells on digital devices in fluid locations, and companies like Regus and WeWork offer temporary co-working spaces for these digital dreams. Priorities are different for this community; a reliable internet connection is at the top of the list. Keywords in conversations include mbps, nomad visas, co-working/co-living spaces, cost of living, and safety. Digital nomadism goes beyond socio-demographic variables, unifying people from all walks of life who share a similar lifestyle. In this regard, Plumia is a wannabe digital country, targeting digital nomads, and aiming at giving everyone the opportunity to become a global citizen (Lee and Bruns 2021).

Beyond the possibility of having a location-independent existence, other seeds of digital freedom are sprouting. Decentraland, a blockchain-based virtual world, is one example. Similarly, Bitnation and Cultu.re define themselves as virtual nations. These alternative systems show a transition of trust from traditional centralized institutions to decentralized digital systems based on software, networks, and algorithms (Baldwin 2018). They aim to provide alternative digital models that coexist with the traditional systems. These options are managed by and targeted for beyonders, i.e., individuals who ignore the established systems and operate independently (De Filippi 2018). Additionally, some nations are also following the digital brick road. Estonia is leading the way. The country is betting on digital

bureaucracy and transparency using blockchain technology and offering e-residency to digital citizens regardless their nationality and country of residence.

Social media has also evolved and transformed. Some years ago, there were near-monopolies in every category of social media, but the scope is widening and new options are sprouting. For example, Facebook was the only social network option in its category, for many in the West, just as WeChat is in China. Even though these are still the mainstream options, there are many other choices that have emerged as alternatives to the main players (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, LinkedIn, Whatsapp). MeWe, Minds, Vero, and Ello, among many others, offer alternative options. The typology of the social media landscape is also more diverse nowadays. Reddit, Discord, Clubhouse, Tiktok, Twitch, Snapchat, and Onlyfans are among the most popular choices and each has its own particularities. Video, audio, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are spawning new platforms. Some of the classic options are also reinventing themselves. Facebook, rebranded Meta, exemplifies this, promoting the Metaverse to deflect antitrust interest and Meta is betting big on Horizon Worlds, as the foundation of its Metaverse claims.

We have witnessed an increase in specialization and focus in specific digital segments and niches. This is the case in both social media and applications. Social networks for specific targets like neighbors (Nextdoor) or families (Life360) have been gaining traction. Applications also follow this tendency. Take, for example, the case of the popular dating app Tinder. It is a general app with millions of users around the planet. However, the dating scene has seen some options emerge, focusing on certain types of consumers. This is the case of Ninder or Fairytrail, which target digital nomads. Grindr focuses on gay consumers, while Meetmindful is another dating app for those who look for mindful connections.

The evolution of digital consumption offerings from general options to specific ones, affects all categories of social media and related technologies. The gig economy has flourished since the beginning of the digital age. It started with general sites catering all types of gigs (e.g., Upwork and Fiverr), but it has evolved into specialized niches like Kolabtree, which offers freelance opportunities to scientists and industry experts.

The free knowledge sharing community, Wikipedia, set the stage for other platforms to follow its trail by sharing more specialized knowledge. Investopedia, Star-Trekpedia, and Starwarspedia illustrate such ventures. But shared social knowledge can also emerge in other ways: Facebook groups, Telegram groups, Slack, Discord, Clubhouse, or Reddit offer opportunities to share information and knowledge with people around the world who are connected through the same interest.

Social is not only half of the infamous term “social media,” but is also a crucial part of other keywords in the digital society, like social trading, social arb(itrage) investing, social living/co-living, social gaming, or live social selling. All of these socialities rest on the idea of sharing and community, making the social aspect of life pivotal in the digital society. Additionally, technology gives life to the gregarious self through group video calls and also offers the opportunity of enjoying activities together, like watching a movie on Netflix, across the globe. The use of internet audio and video has skyrocketed. Not only because of video calls but also because the increasing popularity of video response options, voice media, reels, lives on social media, as well as new social media based only on video (e.g., TikTok) or on audio (e.g., Clubhouse). In general, communication has become more visual and creative including a great amount of viral visual content, like viral memes and videos, emojis, gifs, and stickers.

## **What's new in this stage of the digital age?**

### ***What's digital?***

New defining topics, boundaries, and phenomena in the digital arena have gained momentum and expanded. For example, “digital nomadism” as discussed above (see Chapter 2 by Atanasova, Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Mimoun) has crystalized as a work/lifestyle in recent years. Anyone with a digital device, a skill that can be practiced anywhere, and an internet connection can work from most anywhere in the world and often earn first-world pay with third-world living costs. Romantic scenes of writers and artists in European sidewalk cafes in the interwar years (Humayun and Belk 2020) have been replaced by digital nomads working on their laptops under a coconut tree. Similarly, while the first edition of this volume addressed the notion of cyborgs (cybernetic organism), it did not get into the expanded idea of transhumanism (see Chapter 4 by Lima), which is the utopian ideal toward which the cyborg is seen as a step. And the transhuman is seen as a transitional stage between humans and posthumans – the species that transhumanists believe will evolve or be created and which will supplant and replace us. The cyborg is a modified human: part human and part machine. While this is one possible step toward the posthuman, others exist involving genetic technology, nanotechnology, and neurotechnology, including uploading consciousness into artificially intelligent computer, robot, or other form of artificial human (Belk et al. 2020).

Pushing or blurring boundaries between what were previously considered firm and discrete categories also has a crucial role in this edition. We see this in Chapters 3 through 5, since transhumanism is by definition boundary-straddling, as noted above. In Chapter 3, Kamleitner and Kokkoris offer the interesting idea that with that increasing ephemerality of consumer digital goods and with many once owned consumer goods becoming services within the sharing economy (Belk 2007, 2014), the desire for ownership and what they call graspability is thwarted. We appear to be moving toward a less materialistic and more fluid model of ownership in the digital future (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), although how frustrating this will be across generations remains an open question. Kamleitner and Kokkoris suggest that how we handle the trade-off between experiences and ownership of material goods will be part of this equation.

Haraway (1991) told us that we are all already cyborgs with our glasses, hearing aids, pacemakers, and such. In Chapter 4, Lima shows us how much more we might become cyborgs with implants, antennas, and vibrators that lead us toward transhumanism. He takes an embodied phenomenological perspective to describe a bit of how it feels to hear colors, sense magnetic north, and open your car with the wave of your hand. Nagle (1974) asked “What is it like to be a bat?” And we will likely never know. But with the phenomenological accounts of these digital pioneers, we gain an understanding of what it is like to be a transhuman.

Foehr and Germelmann, in Chapter 5, raise another interesting problematic in considering the impact of ubiquitous smart devices on digital consumption and how these new technologies challenge traditional ways of conducting consumer research and theorizing. Their focus is less on the objects themselves than on the assemblage of persons and things and processes that take place in shopping for, acquiring, and using these objects, especially among the generation that has had access to such devices from birth. They suggest the need for enriched and broadened theoretical and methodological approaches drawing on cross-disciplinarity, hybridity, object-oriented ontologies, and new conceptualizations of human and object engagement. Just as a new generation of digital consumers is arising, so must a new generation of researchers arise to meet these challenges.

### ***Representing the self and others***

Digital affordances help usher in an era of extreme concern with aural and visual self-presentation. Schau and Gilly (2003) wrote a then-groundbreaking paper about how ordinary people were creating (static) web pages to represent themselves online. In Chapter 6, they team up with Kaliyamurthy to make an updated and more critical assessment of how people represent themselves through contemporary interactive social media. They find that today's affordances give easy access to sophisticated self-presentations on platforms owned by Facebook, Google, and Tencent, but that this powerful ease of use comes at a cost of increased surveillance, appropriation of user labor, and vulnerabilities of various sorts. They offer some theoretical approaches for better understanding the balance of enabling and constraining features of these affordances. Shamayleh and Arsel (Chapter 9) pick up on these trends in the evolution of blogs and related social media affordances including hashtags, livestreaming, channels, and platforms such as TikTok. They conclude that the blurred lines between unpaid user content and sponsored commercial content have made it more difficult for users and raised a number of ethical questions.

As the influencers, YouTubers, and micro-bloggers have learned, there are now also ways to monetize your personality, opinions, advice, and humor if you have a sufficient number of followers, likes, views, and shares. Drenten (Chapter 8) shows how peer-to-peer payment apps also use the exchange of funds not only as a monetary exchange, but also as a means of social interaction. A somewhat similar social interaction with money occurs with red packets (*hang bao*) on Tencent's WeChat app in China (e.g., Weng et al. 2021).

But even as Kaliyamurthy, Schau, and Gilly (Chapter 6) find that the constraints of social networking sites inhibit self-expression, they also find that platform algorithms categorize content and select the audiences that find these creations on their news feeds. While social media users develop folk theories about how these algorithms operate, they remain black boxes. Solomon (Chapter 7) detects another problem that he also has made the focus of a recent book (Solomon 2021). He calls it the chameleon consumer who keeps changing fluid identities that cannot be neatly put in a box. This holds for gender, age, wealth, and other potential segmentation variables. This boundary blurring anticipates the last two chapters in this section by Belk on chatbots (Chapter 10) and Bakpayev on robots (Chapter 11). These humanoid voices and physical beings are boundary straddlers who span the human-machine divide and increasingly blur it thanks to AI technology. Cyborgs also straddle the human-machine divide as machine-like humans rather than human-like machines.

### ***Researching the digital consumer***

Given the ever-evolving nature of online digital culture, it is to be expected that it will continue to change in the future and that digital consumption research, data collection, analysis, and interpretive methods will need to evolve. Kozinets (Chapter 12) introduces the concept of a pervasive "technoculture" and demonstrates how internet seditionists, revisionists, and trolls spread vitriol and hatred online. He argues that we need careful ethnography and netnography to be able to monitor, call out, and potentially counteract such propaganda. As in wartime portrayals with a clear (if purposely constructed – Wilk 1997) image of "us" and "them," it is normal to expect "them" to use extreme exaggeration of images of "us" that play upon the fears of "their people" (e.g., Buruma 2005; Keen 1988). But it may be possible to take these same often racist and misogynistic images and defuse them with wit, humor, and irony.



Chapter 13 by Colleoni and Corsaro constitutes an essential reading for understanding the growing power and lack of transparency of digital algorithms in ad matching, recommendation systems, feature engineering, and decision systems. While the case of Cambridge Analytica obtaining Facebook data to target and manipulate consumers drew public attention and outrage, the basic process of using Big Data to select and influence consumers is what market segmentation and ad targeting do all the time. A number of recent demonstrations of the often-unintended biases of algorithmic systems show the danger of using such systems despite the black box invisibility of their workings. In addition, the distributed moral responsibility of human-machine agency in such networks makes marketers feel less sense of responsibility when biases are discovered in the results of such decisions – for example, of those to whom we grant or refuse mortgages, give different insurance rates, hire, or match in dating apps (Noble 2018; O’Neil 2016; Pasquale 2015; Slater 2013). These mechanized decisions have real human consequences. So, while algorithms are based on simple programming, machine learning, deep learning, and neural networks can create further invisibility of how predictors are selected and combined. This does not exculpate marketers who use these systems.

In Chapter 14, Putra, Fernandez, and Lee begin with a discussion of generational differences in consumer data collection and proceed to the additional considerations posed by the COVID-19 and the need to move much of this research online. They demonstrate the age-specific uses of a variety of projective techniques for individual and group interviews in this online context. Ethical issues involving informed consent are stressed. In addition, the authors explore the uses of virtual worlds, immersive VR, and AR for gaining additional participant engagement in research tasks in naturalistic settings. Additional tools like eye-tracking cameras, virtual shop-alongs, interviews using text messaging, and wearable technologies are also noted. The result of the creative deployment of these techniques is ideally an inexpensive, engaging, and ethical set of research methods that are both age-appropriate and suited to research with home-bound digitally connected consumers.

Concluding this section, Eagar, Mitchell, Thomas, and Shi (Chapter 15) examine the challenge of researching distributed live performances involving a mix of audio, visual and textual data, on multiple platforms. They use the context of studying audience and non-audience reactions to two battle rap paid performances produced by Verzuz on Instagram Live and Apple Music/TV. They faced a unique challenge of trying to simultaneously capture and match the performances and viewer comments on Instagram and Twitter. The chapter reads like a good detective novel involving trying to find a mix of free and paid apps that could help accomplish this with or without researcher intervention and with or without researcher computer coding skills. In addition to providing a largely successful set of methods for solving this puzzle, the authors provide useful help for deciding whether or not human subjects ethics approval is needed.

### ***Communicating, interacting, and socializing***

The chapters in this section focus on people seeking a sense of community online. They may be marginalized, transgressive, or seeking companionship and kindred spirits, but they share a common willingness to interact and socialize with each other online. In Chapter 16, Baudet, Parmentier, and Fischer are concerned with a set of online practices and tactics that includes astroturfing, cyberbullying, hate speech, doxing, trolling, public shaming/cancel culture, dog-whistling, cybermob attacks, and vigilantism. All are transgressive of public norms and some rise to the level of illegality. The authors distinguish between those



activities that are based on sincere, if misguided, beliefs, and others that involve spreading intentionally false information meant to harm a person or group. Others who recirculate information that was intentionally false may believe it to be true. Even when social media platforms have policies that prohibit such content, these rules have infrequently been enforced by web giants until government threats of antitrust legislation became louder. The authors note that despite their naïve initial assumption that these transgressive behaviors would “be unambiguously objectionable to any ‘reasonable’ party,” in examining the context in which they occurred (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), the authors conclude that “it’s complicated” and the social and historical context of the transgression must be considered.

Two apparently conflicting notions arose near the end of the last millennium. One is the rise of individualism noted by Putnam (2000) in *Bowling Alone*. The other is the rise of neo-tribalism facilitated by the ability to easily find those with common interests or passions and forming online communities of interest (Cova et al. 2007). A solution for this irony is offered by Turkle (2011) who suggests that we are *Alone Together*. Using an autoethnography of “mommy bloggers,” Cova and Dessart (Chapter 17) provide a more detailed look at this phenomenon. They recognize that there is necessarily more content on popular online sites than any individual can reciprocally contribute. They also identify the “gregarious anonymous” consumer who is involved in following a blog, and who identifies with other participants, but offers little, and effectively remains unknown to other followers of the most popular bloggers. In resolving this paradox, they note that just because someone lives alone (an increasing trend) need not mean that they are lonely. They cite evidence that those who live alone are in fact more socially active than those who live in families.

In Chapter 18, Illouz and Kotliar present their thesis of the “emotionalization of the web.” By this, they mean that the commercialization and commodification of Web 2.0 also leverages consumer desire for profit. In doing so, they outline capitalism as involving the logics of commodification, marketing, advertising, branding, quantification, standardization, obsolescence, and innovation. To this, we might add neoliberal free marketization, neocolonialism, perpetual expansion, and growth. Significantly for the present chapter, they use the apparent nature of the Tinder app as a case study with which to illustrate five characteristics by which the app disrupts previous forms of mating sociality: visualized self, velocity and abundance, networked interactivity, evaluative reasoning, and dividuated eroticism. There is a rich diversity of phenomena invoked here, including Rosa’s social acceleration, Schwartz’s paradox of abundance, Freud’s scopophilia, the desiring machines of Deleuze and Guattari, and the individuals of McKim Marriott and Marilyn Strathern. The authors recognize consumer complicity in self-branding and self-exploitation (Zwick et al. 2008) and presumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Using a binary gendered approach, Illouz and Kotliar then use secondary accounts to demonstrate how Tinder exploits the particular capitalist subjectivity of users to commodify emotions, filter them through a mediation process with matching algorithm apparently based on profile attractiveness as indicated by others’ swipes left or right, and then sells our commodified desire back to us. No doubt sex robots (see Chapter 11, Belk 2022; Devlin 2018) will provide a further test of these ideas.

Veer (Chapter 19) takes a more social approach in analyzing the role of secrets, revelations, and out-group attacks in reinforcing secret characteristics like LGBTQ identities, depression, anorexia, and self-harm. Extending his work on secret identities from his chapter in the first edition of this handbook, he shows the importance of online sharing of stigmatized identities, gathering a sense of community support, and validation of identity by others with the same type of secret identity. For conspiracy theory online communities like QAnon followers, it is also important that other followers act as an echo chamber, that there are attacks

by oppositional groups that reinforce the belief that the followers alone share the secret, and that they share feelings of persecution. Their unity is also aided by confirmation bias and the multiplying homophily effects of social media.

Concluding this section, Thompson and Patterson (Chapter 20) dissect what the growing artificial intelligence in our smartphones, their software, and the AI of additional apps means for our daily lives and our well-being. They make an interesting comparison to the consumer relationships with technology studied by Mick and Fournier in the late 1990s when today's smartphone would have seemed to be a magical object. However, today we, sometimes, still struggle with feeling more like we are slaves to our machines rather than their masters (Schweitzer et al. 2019). Thompson and Patterson also address another phenomenon largely out of reach ten years ago: the quantified self (Bode and Kristensen 2016; DuFault and Schouten 2020). They also document our extremely strong attachments to our smartphones or at least to their affordances. Hodder (2012) distinguishes between dependence and dependencies when we become entrapped by an object relationship, as seems to be the case with people and their smartphones. Today it would seem that we have outsourced our memory, our relationships, our planning, our childcare, and more to our smart devices (Hochschild 2012). They are our lifelines to the world and to each other. Still, this is neither a one-sided critique nor celebration of the smartphone. The device is analyzed as both empowering and entangling. It provides private intimate connections as well as ubiquitous surveillance. Whatever may become of smartphones in the future, they are emblematic of our lives today.

### *Using digital*

The chapters in this section consider a diverse array of consumer applications of digital technology: self-tracking, omnichannel consumption, healthcare, stock investing, and digital decluttering. As with the treatment of the smartphone in Chapter 20, there are both positive and negative aspects in most of these digitally enabled consumption arenas.

In Chapter 21, Bode and Kristensen begin by drawing an insightful comparison between academic arguments in consumer research between “number crunchers” and qualitative researchers 30 years ago and consumer self-quantifiers and their detractors today. The range of self-trackers and self-quantifiers is diverse however and also includes those applying a more playful or ludic logic. Some collect qualitative data like diary entries. There are self-experimenters with an N of one, but there are also those who share their data for more aggregate analysis. A wide variety of things are tracked by different people, including bio feedback from the body, diet, athletic performance, sleep patterns, menstrual cycles, weight, sleep, sexual activity, and much more. Tele-medicine has gotten a big boost during the last years, and self-trackers and self-tracking digital devices have helped facilitate this shift as well. Bode and Kristensen also observe the connection of such data to our sense of self and note that the quantified self can become a second shadow or doppelgänger self. Although some critical media treatments label these practices weird narcissism and extreme navel-gazing and there are worries about involuntary algorithmic tracking and government surveillance, the authors note that these data and devices can also help to serve aggregate and humanitarian purposes such as tracking Arab and Israeli land use in Palestine and Jerusalem, helping monitor frail elderly, or tracking contagious patients.

In the beginning of Chapter 22, Denegri-Knott, Jenkins, and Molesworth make the bold statement that “today, much of our aspirations for personal transformation are reliant on digital media.” In other words, the stuff that our dreams are made of is now largely digital. The authors go on to explain that digital virtual consumption (DVC) is the realm of the

imaginary in which we envision largely positive self-transformative experiences with mental realities that we may or may not materialize or physically experience. They suggest that Pinterest, Instagram, TikTok, and many videogames help us nourish our fantasies and bring our daydreams closer to reality. However, they also note that algorithmic recommendation engines filter choices and offer a curated set of alternatives. They offer a model of when DVC experiences can be enchanting or disenchanting and realized or unrealized. This is embedded in a matrix of practices and resources that can be either enabling or constraining. The result is a sophisticated model of desire and transformation, mediated by digital affordances.

Penz and Hogg (Chapter 23) update our understandings of consumer choice and decision-making with digital devices. In omnichannel shopping, consumers use a combination of online and offline shopping aids. For example, in “showrooming,” they search for products in brick and mortar stores but purchase online. On the other hand, in “webrooming,” they find products online and then buy them in offline retailers. Consumers may also consult their smartphones as they shop in an offline store in order to check prices elsewhere, available coupons, and consumer ratings of products and stores. But it should not be assumed that consumers are only seeking the best deal. Socializing, exercising moral beliefs (e.g., fair trade, shop local), and the stimulation of sights, sounds, and smells are all part of the experience as well. Post-purchase anxiety or dissonance can also be assuaged with digital reassurances, especially with high-end purchases such as vehicles. The authors show how the digital world has affected our shopping and lay out an agenda for future research.

Chapter 24 by Vicdan and Dholakia shares some common aspects with the self-tracking phenomenon considered in Chapter 21, and indeed, the patients in the present study of the datafication of health do often upload some of their data to their medical records. But there are also important differences. Their data becomes part of a Big Data system that can make decisions and recommendations. There are also medical personnel in the loop who also intervene in prescribing actions and monitoring outcomes. And sometimes the patients are part of controlled clinical trials. But there are problems as well. Data security, storage, and anonymity are among them. Hospitals have had their data stolen and their hacked systems frozen until exorbitant ransoms are paid. The technologized self may experience the same estrangement as the doppelgänger self-noted in Chapter 21. And it is not always clear that outcomes are superior when a patient’s medical condition becomes a data point.

In Chapter 25, Schroeder and Zwick analyze the new digital fintech scene with such possibilities as non-fungible tokens, cryptocurrencies, and robo-advising. They also detect two new types of young investors in the stock market: the kinematic investor who is motivated by “the speed of money” in quick returns and losses, and the entrepreneurial investor who is interested in “fiscal self-realization and economic security rather than for having fun.” The kinematic investor is also motivated by the aesthetics of investing and market moving ventures such as GameStop investing as well as volatile cryptocurrencies. The thrill of action, the authors point out, is similar to gambling and Denegri-Knott, Jenkins, and Molesworth’s *Digital Virtual Consumption* (see Chapter 22). The entrepreneurial investor, on the other hand, seizes the agency that the internet has brought to investing and seeks to remold him- or herself into an entrepreneurial self. Previously collective forms of investment like retirement plans and mutual funds have been individualized as day-traders, fractional stock buyers, and other individual investors take it upon themselves to manage their financial futures. Consumers are getting increasingly independent from institutions; so, some young investors no longer trust their employer or the government to take care of their elder years and turn to themselves to take charge. They may trust the algorithmic machinations of electronically traded funds and robo-advisors, but many even forgo these offerings in order

to do their own trading. The authors also attribute this individualization of risk handling to the neoliberal attitude of the individual more generally. And from a Foucaultian perspective, neoliberalism is a form of governmentality.

While Chapter 25 was about consumers taking control of their lives through online investing, Chapter 26 by Gollnhofer and Manke is about consumers who feel that their online lives are out of control, primarily due to the amount of time they spend on social media. Unlike physical possessions, digital files and apps today do not take up physical space and are not generally visible to others. Today's digital devices as well as cloud storage make digital space constraints less of a problem than is the case with analog storage. These are all disincentives for digital decluttering, although the participants in depth interviews conducted by the authors still reported problems with space constraints such as having too many photos on their phones. They also lacked the disposition rituals that McCracken (1988) identified for physical possessions to which attachments had been formed. One concern raised in the digital realm was with having so much digital clutter that it became difficult to find things. However, in that case, it is possible to use search functions to locate items via meta-data like file names, dates, and, in the case of e-mails, "to" or "from" searches.

### ***Playing, praying, educating, and entertaining***

In this section, we turn to a variety of online practices that seek to capture our imaginations. We have engaged in these practices previously, but they take on a new character when we digitally engage them. There we ideally find not only the compelling offerings of old, but also new digital dimensions.

In Chapter 27, Gretzel discusses how digital affordances help certain of us move from mobility (e.g., Sheller and Urry 2004) to hypermobility and how these patterns have been impacted by global disruptions during the last years. Hypermobile people include digital nomads, vanlifers, competitive travelers, travel influencers, and binge flyers. Gretzel shows the underlying motivations for such obsessive travel as involving the investment of time and emotion in order to achieve a variety of explicit and implicit goals.

Chapter 28 by Santana, Husemann, and Eckhardt is both about spirituality *of or in* the internet and its digital affordances (e.g., Bainbridge 2013; Cobb 1998; Davis 1998; Helm 1993; Stahl 1999) as well as spirituality and traditional religion *on or through* the digital (e.g., Campbell and Grieve 2014; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Herzfeld 2009; Leibovitz 2013; Wagner 2012). As the authors point out, digital developments in robotics (see Chapters 10 and 11) have allowed multilinguistic robots to dispense blessings and other robots to replace Buddhist priests and conduct funeral ceremonies. The chapter also discusses sacralizing brands. Although religion and consumerism are often taken as competing projects (Varul 2008), this has not stopped brands from cloaking themselves in an image of expressing religious piety (e.g., Kitiarsa 2008; Shirazi 2016). Although these examples, more systematically detailed by the authors, may seem striking, it seems inevitable that religions will adopt the latest technologies. Even though the priesthood in medieval Europe vigorously opposed the printing of Bibles in vernacular languages rather than Latin (Belk 2006), like the example of Socrates opposing books (Manguel 1996), such opposition soon bows to the affordances of technology when the bargain is compelling.

Having just suggested that compelling innovation can overcome reluctance to allow disruption of older time-honored traditions, de Bruyckere (Chapter 29) presents a test case in asking "Do we need more innovation in educational innovations?" De Bruyckere shows that many of our new educational techniques are not new at all. Furthermore, he argues,

new technology can sometimes hurt rather than improve education. Every advocate of technological determinism needs a critical skeptic, and de Bruyckere applies such skepticism to digital educational technologies from iPads to MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

In Chapter 30, Lanier, Rader, and Fowler begin by dissecting fans and fan research. Their focus is the appropriation of narrative power of fannish transmedia storytellers centered on a particular film or book series. They note that although the always ambiguous and fluctuating relationships between producers and fan-created or poached transmediated narrative content continues in a digital age, there are some changes. With greater technical means like machinima at their disposal, fans have been able to produce more sophisticated films at a tiny fraction of the costs to studio producers, and in some cases actually compete with them. As a result, some producers have become more aggressive protectors of copyrights. Others have tried to co-opt and direct the energies of fans in a more congenial direction. But fans have also found ways such as crowdfunding to increase their ability to act independently. The authors conclude with a fruitful treatment positioning fans and fan fiction creators as trickster figures.

Chapter 31 by Dalmoro, dos Santos Fleck, and Vargas Rossi addresses the growing importance of online games as an individual quest, an interpersonal form of play (for the majority of games which are multiperson), and a cultural phenomenon that is spreading across platforms and popular culture. They estimate that 75% of US households contain at least one gamer. Clearly such consumer play is also a focus of big business. Videogame competitions are more popular in Asia where viewers follow favorites and pay big ticket prices to watch tournaments on their computer consoles. The authors characterize gamers as problem-solvers and note that games are far more participative than other media like books and film. Gamers share a common interest and may even achieve a state of mutual flow. And games may be the gateway to the metaverse. Nevertheless, the authors also discern possible detrimental effects including addiction and isolation.

### ***Issues of concern in society and culture***

While many of the previous chapters have touched on societal issues and situate their topics in a cultural context, the chapters in this final section focus specifically on the ethical and moral aspects of the digitization of consumer culture. These issues include those of gender, diversity, privacy, surveillance, climate change, consumer movements, fake news, sex, and trust. Most of these issues existed before the digitization of our lives, but all have taken new meaning and importance in a digital society.

Chapter 32 by Ekpo begins by noting that digital technology was once heralded as a democratizing source of opportunity for all to gain power that was wielded by the few. Indeed, it has been helpful for many marginalized people who can now, for example, shop online without fear of discrimination. And internet search engines, blogs, and online support groups help in gaining access to peers, providing relevant information, and offering a platform on which to present personal views and help others. Yet, in spite of this initial hope, in far too many instances, the internet has been found to be disempowering for people of color and other minority groups. For example, the equivalent of the real estate practice of redlining (excluding minorities from areas of housing reserved for whites) is found online through the practice of weblining. Although it is illegal to discriminate online or offline on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual preference, class, and other discriminatory categories, the use of proxy variables such as zip code in the US results in de facto discrimination in web advertising. In addition, often poor and minority consumers lack access

to a computer and internet service at home. And often unintended biases in algorithms and facial recognition software disadvantage racial minorities. We can also identify marketing models such as those based on customer lifetime value that also discriminate against poor and minority consumers. Ekpo concludes that it is not solely the responsibility of Silicon Valley and governments to prevent discrimination. Marketers are equally culpable.

In Chapter 33, Ketola, Selander, and Ruvio present a study of how agender people present themselves online and offline. They note that the term agender came from references to God as an agender amorphous individual. Nevertheless, agender people are a minority within the LGBTQA+ community. They are defined by their declarations that gender is irrelevant. In their evolving self-narratives, they find that self-expression online is easier before coming out in public. They say that it is easier to find gender-neutral clothing online. They also adopt gender neutral names like Lou and are comfortable with mixing gendered clothing and possessions once they become more comfortable with the agender identity. In this process, they are found to use three strategies: gender neutralization, gender sterilization, and agender performance. However, the authors caution that there is variability within the still evolving agender community.

Grant and Waite (Chapter 34) argue that the “privacy paradox” in which people say they are very worried about their online privacy and yet continue to agree to end-user license agreements is not resolved by a rational consumer trade-off model nor by a beaten down model of privacy fatigue, apathy, cynicism, and alienation. Rather they reference recent work on space as a resource and promote recognition of multiple digital selves which other work suggests consists of embodied, recorded, and disembodied selves. Thus, we might, for example, willingly give up our locational data, but more jealously guard our personal data, image, and voice. They call for further research observing natural behavior rather than relying upon self-report, lab studies, and survey research.

Chapter 35, by He, Li, and Husain, tackles the issues involved in the normalization of tracking and online surveillance. They position their chapter theoretically in terms of Foucault’s concepts of biopower and panoptical surveillance with similarity to Orwell’s (1949) Big Brother. As their key example, they take China’s Social Credit System and the increases in surveillance that China instituted during the COVID-19 crisis in the name of curbing virus transmission. Through a combination of ubiquitous surveillance cameras with facial recognition software that works even with masks, cell phone geographic tracking, computer activity monitoring, government data, mandatory ID cards, hospital records, and the credit records and purchase data from the country’s two largest social media and banking/payment systems, they rolled out a program that could trace people throughout the country. They could not only identify people who had been in contact with infected people, but also people who violated mandated quarantines, had poor health records, poor consumption habits, or poor eating habits. In the larger scope of daily life, people are rated and given social credit scores that can reward or penalize them for “good” and “poor” behaviors. The fear is that the unprecedented access to this system of records will continue and be used in a huge social engineering program to produce not only docile bodies, but also “good citizens” that obey the party, strive for good health, and create “good” families.

In Chapter 36, Perera, Albinsson, and Ray Chaudhury examine young consumer activism addressing climate change. They note the parallels between the Woke movements of the 2020s and the Wide Awake movement of the early 1860s in which young abolitionist protesters against US slavery banged pots and pans outside the homes of anti-abolitionist representatives, chanting slogans of “No justice, no sleep.” Today’s young activists have a variety of online resources that proved particularly useful during COVID-19 lockdowns.



Besides social media popular with young people, coordinated local and global movements such as Greta Thunberg's FFF (Fridays for Future) have proved important. FFF and related youth activist organizations coordinate both online and in-person. Local variations include FFF's support of Indian farmers who were striking against the government's new agricultural laws. Both of these examples concern long-term actions rather than passing fads.

Chapter 37 by Handelman offers a complement to the preceding chapter and also traces American consumer movements to the abolitionists who began in the 1820s and to the National Consumers' League started in 1899 with roots as far back as the Boston Tea Party of 1764. And he traces it forward to the "anti-globalization" movement of the 1990s focused on Nike, that was one of the consumer movements he studied with Kozinets (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Handelman takes his analysis into the 21st century by analyzing three phases of digital transformation: digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation. The general movement is from top-down to consumer-controlled movements with an increasing role for social media. While he sees these three stages as evolving sequentially and as moving from command-direction to more diffuse efforts, he does not see each as supplanting its predecessors. Rather they continue to exist simultaneously. Foucault, critical theory, and brand public perspectives are brought to bear in order to better understand this evolution. After detailing the differences in these approaches, Handelman provides a series of research questions to be investigated by future research.

In Chapter 38, Yeo notes that since his chapter in the first edition of this handbook, concern with viral content has spread from a few YouTube videos to a much broader array of material, especially marketer-generated content where going viral is an explicit aim. He also notes that whereas initial treatments tended to be celebratory, the spread of this phenomenon to fake news, conspiracy theories, and anti-vaxxer content has tempered this enthusiasm. While a great deal of research attention has been focused on marketer created messages, relatively little has focused on misinformation and disinformation. Four types of models are reviewed: memetic, affective, networked, and algorithmic. The propaganda mechanisms for the four models are participatory culture, emotional contagion, word-of-mouth cascade, and algorithmic culture, respectively. While the models tend to be more satisfactory as we move from the first to the last, none is complete.

Near the end of Chapter 39, Petersson McIntyre notes that "before Internet 2.0, fashion designers and retailers regularly sent 'spies' to the street, school yards and clubs to check out what the cool kids were doing and wearing." Nowadays popular fashion bloggers/influencers are pursued by advertisers and sponsors in hopes that they will be featured in the trends they initiate. Besides the number of followers and likes, advertisers can give the fashion, beauty, or mommy blogger discount codes for viewers so they can tell where sales are coming from. What was once a source of play has become a serious revenue stream for female entrepreneurs seeking to turn their beauty, personality, and knowledge into a profession. Beyond Hochschild's (1983) emotional labor, McIntyre calls the proscription of these bloggers digital labor. Digital video equipment is relatively cheap today, but as competition increases, so does the cost of achieving high production values.

In Chapter 40, Kermani, Darke, and Brady first detail the various internet phenomena that foster distrust, including manufactured reviews, targeted advertising based on web searches, and privacy violations. They, then, identify factors that can enhance trust and several theories of trust. In marketing, such theorizing can be traced back to Friestad and Wright (1994) and their work on "schemer schema" in commercial persuasion. Kermani and colleagues identify contemporary trust issues and needed areas of research.



Finally in the Afterword (Chapter 41), Deighton and Kornfeld provide a wonderful overview of the effects of the internet on society. They conclude that it has come a long way from early utopian visions, but that it stops short of being fully dystopian, as some critics have alleged. True, much of it is controlled by five giant corporations, they note. But there are also many benefits from these corporations, and there are other forces affecting how we use the internet every day. They compare the first edition of this handbook to the current volume, using music as an example. They go on to consider the internet's effects on politics and conspiracy theories. And they summarize the ways in which our use of the internet is, in different ways, useful, harmful, and playful. While the future they envision is a bit bleak, they show that there is also room for optimism.

### **Future research on the paradoxes of the digital society**

We live in a world of infinite digital possibilities, and we cannot envision the end of it. Quite the opposite. New ways of digitalize every aspect of our lives appear every day to the point where the digital is pervasive and sometimes invasive, enveloping every minute of our existence. So we may need to escape this technoscape by attending digital detox retreats or practicing digital intermittent fasting, but not so much that we become outsiders to the digital society. Technology can be used to disconnect from technology. This is one of the paradoxes of the digital society that may draw future research interest. It is connected to the idea of individuals consuming technology or being consumed by it. Smartphones and other digital devices can assert a powerful hypnotizing effect on users, to the point that we need to check our devices compulsively. An illustration of this is a picture of the metro on a random day. Most commuters are totally absorbed by the data coming from their phones, even if a few are just looking down in order to not appear awkwardly unconnected. This is a very different image to those in the predigital times when only some of us had our heads buried in print material. In the same vein, we have all witnessed pedestrians walking mindlessly into the jaws of danger. However, consumers can also become more aware of how much they have walked every day, thanks to an app which counts steps and measures distances for them. We have gone from counting steps manually to pedometers to electronic handheld devices to smartphones to watches to rings that not only count steps, but also calories, sleep, respiration, heart rate and rhythm, blood pressure and sugar, sexual health, and more.

During the past decade, the digital world has been criticized for offering filtered, partial, and unrealistic views of life. Technology offers the tools to beautify everyday life and transform utopias into common lifestyles. While filters, fake followers, and Photoshop, among other apps and affordances, aid in providing a fairytale-like view of reality, they have also served as the springboard for counter-movements, which favor genuine, unfiltered, and raw views of reality as opposed to echo chambers, in which we receive no opposing opinions or views. In this way, social media has served as the stage for both celebrities and anonymous individuals to be heard and seen, sharing some of what is behind the scenes, talking unapologetically about different types of struggles, and revealing less than ideal episodes of their lives. In the same vein, some apps like Dispo, Popparazzi, or BeReal, and social networks like Clubhouse and TikTok, bet on more spontaneous and unedited options (LaPorte 2021).

In our digital society, some consumers seem to be less self-conscious than in previous times, and it has become commonplace to see someone striking a pose in a public place or being totally self-absorbed taking a selfie while being surrounded by a crowd. The world has become a stage and there's a whole new industry including professional photographers,

drones, and digital clothing, helping influencers to keep up with their ideal lifestyle on Instagram. This is the 21st century version of keeping up with the Joneses. Number of followers, likes, shares, and comments, all help us to keep score. So, the idea of “social capital” by Bourdieu (1983) could be revisited nowadays, to include “social media capital.” Also in connection with the focus on the self, there are those who use dating apps not for dating as much as for asking the “mirror mirror on the wall” for reassurance that they are popular (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021). This selfish approach contrasts with a more selfless blueprint that is also fostered by technology. We may have long ago lost the ideal that “information just wants to be free,” but there are many pockets of generous sharing to be found online: recipes, instructions for doing basically everything, and amateur stories, music, and fan fiction still exist in online islands not yet colonized by advertising. Real human connection, activism, solidarity, and support have expanded in the digital society. Technology allows us to be part of international movements, making us feel like we are part of a bigger picture. The “me” approach offers a striking contrast with the “we” viewpoint, and individual aspirations coexist with collective goals. While some consumers’ behavior is driven by the idea of getting likes and followers (go-getters), others (go-givers) are motivated by the idea of providing inspiration, knowledge, or making a difference. Nevertheless, this giving is not always positive, as we can find some consumers whose main role is trolling, judging, and sabotaging. These two profiles are not mutually exclusive, and we may find hybrid versions. Together they show the range of possibilities.

We can see a parallel between the burgeoning stage of the digital age and the infatuation phase in a relationship. But as we have noted earlier, this phase is over and we have entered into a more stable stage. However, just as in human relationships, we may find different ways of relating to technology. Since the line between humanity and technology is increasingly blurry, future research could focus on the parallels between the ways of relating to people and technology. With technology being increasing “humanized,” can we find consumers showing the same attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant, or fearful-avoidant) in relation to technology that they show in relation to other people? In the same vein, taking as a starting point the close connection that some consumers develop with technology, we can investigate whether that relationship embodies the qualities of the different types of love according to the ancient Greek, i.e., eros, philia, ludus, storge, philautia, pragma, or agape.

We have certainly experienced a digital quantum leap in recent years, with technology widening and deepening its impact on our existence. Digitization has permeated certain areas of our lives which, apparently, were secretly private. Instead, we share much intimate information and have drawn the curtains on our privacy. Dating apps and sexting are examples. But as much as technology is deeply ingrained in our lives, allowing us to interact and communicate with people around the globe, we have also learned that high touch cannot be fully replaced with high tech, just yet. The breadth of connections may have increased, but it might have come at the cost of depth in relationships. “Attending” an opera concert by Andrea Bocelli livestreamed from the Duomo in Milan on YouTube allows us to share his amazing performance and the beauty of the cathedral with millions of people from around the world. These images and sounds can create a powerful experience, from thousands of kilometers away, triggering feelings that some of us will always remember. Yet, as impactful as it was, the experience behind the screen is different from being fully present in the Italian cathedral. Likewise, Alexa can turn the lights on and off and cyborgs can replace some human functions, but the experience of connecting with other beings by looking into their eyes has not yet being fully replicated by our technological mates.

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