

TREADING THE PERILOUS WATERS OF STAYING ELECTRONICALLY CONNECTED

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to examine the impact of the use of electronics on consumer risky behaviors such as attitude toward complaining, entitlement, exhibitionism, impulse buying, materialism, risk attraction, and variety-seeking tendency. The results indicate that staying electronically connected, which is measured by the number of hours consumers spend using their mobile phones per day, does have a direct impact on the consumer risky behaviors tested. This indicates that marketers can use their knowledge of consumer behavior while being electronically connected to segment the market and position to consumers effectively.

INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone replaces home phones, laptops, computers, watches, mp3 players, etc., keeps students connected to Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, provides an alternative communication method that can be done in real time, and is not as distracting as talking on the phone, etc. Those of us who did not grow up as members of these latest generations to enter the halls of higher education, find it difficult to understand what a major part of life electronic communication and connections are. As early as 1983, this electronics explosion and the advent of the Internet were identified as a marketing megatrend [24]. Consumers of all ages can shop, perform product research, ask questions about products, complain about goods and services, and perform word-of-mouth promotion all while using these electronic devices and never having to have an actual face-to-face conversation with a single person.

As consumers, both young and old, increasingly rely upon these devices, critical questions should be asked. What impact does this behavior have on consumers? If there is any impact, is it positive or negative? Recent research suggests that at least part of the impact on the increasing reliance on electronic devices can be negative, at least for young consumers. In a presentation given at the American Public Health Association, [5] reported behavioral health risks for high school students. These findings created a stir in the news media and the story was reported on many different media (e.g., [11] [29]). The high school students involved in that study are now our university students! Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify consumer behaviors and/or attitudes that might be considered risky (not negative) and examine the impact of the use of electronics on these behaviors and attitudes.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

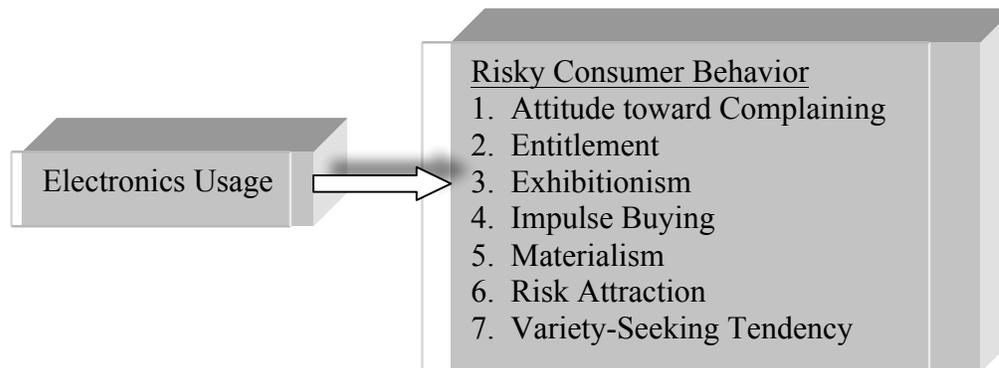
Companies, such as Apple, that market products to consumers, place great value on finding electronic connections with these potential customers (e.g., [10] [31]). However, even these firms that are

searching for a high level of connectedness with their consumers recognize that hyper-connectivity may bring unique challenges (e.g., [13] [30] [32]).

A recent study that surveyed 4,257 high students at 20 public schools reported a connection between certain electronic activities and risky behaviors [5]. The specific behaviors examined in this landmark study were texting and electronic social networking. The results suggested, among other things, that excessive activity in these two areas were related to a variety of risky, even unhealthy, behaviors among these high school students. Hyper-texters (sending more than 120 text messages per day) accounted for nearly 20% of the student population. Further, hyper-networkers (spending three hours or more per day on social networking sites) accounted for 11.5% of these high school students. Hyper-networkers were associated with higher odds ratios for negative health factors such as stress, depression, suicide, substance abuse, fighting, poor sleep, poor academics, higher than average television watching, and parental permissiveness. At the very least, these behaviors are risky, if not negative and dangerous.

While very specific in the two factors the [5] study examined, it is possible that electronics usage overall may result in risky behaviors. In fact, the latest electronic devices giving consumers access to the Internet, real-time chatting and texting, etc., are suspected of influencing consumers into risky attitudes and behaviors in much the same ways as the older electronic devices have done.

Figure 1: Model of Effects of Electronics Usage on Risky Consumer Behavior



Noting the concern that the use of electronic devices may lead consumers toward risky behavior, this paper reports the results of a study designed to assess electronics usage and its impact on seven risky consumer attitudes and behaviors. A model of the hypotheses assessed in this study is found in Figure 1. The first risky behavior is consumer *attitude toward complaining*. This attitude is described as a consumer's personal belief that consumers should complain after a dissatisfying transaction has occurred ([3] [15] [16] [21] [25] [26] [27]). [26] found a significant link between attitude toward complaining and other aggressive behaviors. The preceding discussion leads to the hypothesis:

H₁: The more total time consumers spend using electronic devices, the more likely they are to have a more positive attitude toward complaining.

Another risky consumer behavior is *entitlement*, which is described as a consumer's belief that the world owes him or her something ([12] [14]). A sense of entitlement has been linked to feelings of being taken care of so no individual effort needs to take place [7], crime [2], consumer vanity [12], and consumer narcissism [14]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: The more total time consumers spend using electronic devices, the more likely they are to have a stronger sense of entitlement.

Consumer *exhibitionism* is the next risky consumer behavior examined in this study. It is described as a consumer's willingness to do whatever it takes to be the center of attention [12] [14]. It has been linked to consumer vanity [12], consumer narcissism [14], and virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism [8]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H₃: The more total time consumers spend using electronic devices, the more likely they are to have a tendency toward exhibitionism.

Another risky consumer behavior included in this study is *impulse buying*. It is described as the degree to which consumers not only indicate that they engage in unplanned consumer choice, but they also prefer to make purchases that way [4]. This consumer tendency is viewed as a trait that may produce frequent motivations to buy spontaneously, without thought, and may result in over-spending (Rook and Fisher 1995). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: The more total time consumers spend using electronic devices, the more likely they are to have a tendency toward impulse buying.

The next risky consumer behavior assessed in this study is consumer *materialism*, which is described as the degree to which consumers believe that the number and quality of a person's possessions are an indicator of their success in life [9] [17] [18] [19] [20]. This variable has been linked to consumer vanity [12], over-spending [18], and student distraction [1]. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

H₅: The more total time consumers spend using electronic devices, the more likely they are to be more materialistic.

Consumer *risk attraction* is another variable included in this study. It has been described as the extent to which a consumer is willing to seek out or engage in risky activities [6] [33]. The very nature of this variable suggests it is indicative of risky consumer behavior, which leads us to our next hypothesis:

H₆: The more total time consumers spend using electronic devices, the more likely they are to be attracted to risk.

The final risky behavior is consumer *variety-seeking tendency*. It is described as the degree to which a consumer expresses a desire to try new and different things [4]. Variety-seeking tendency has been linked to impulse buying in response to infomercials [4], consumer risk-taking [28], gambling behavior [28], and impulse buying [23]. This variable, then, is clearly suggestive of risky consumer behavior, and the hypothesis is:

H₇: The more total time consumers spend using electronic devices, the more likely they are to have a tendency toward variety-seeking.

METHODOLOGY

In order to assess the impact of electronics usage on consumer risky behavior, we collected data from 218 participants. Data collection took place in marketing classes at three major universities. Extra credit was offered for students in these classes to complete a questionnaire. Electronics usage was measured using a single-item asking consumers to report the total time spent on electronic devices during a day. This data was collected by providing a complete list of activities that can take place using these devices, and asking the respondents to write in the approximate amount of time per day, to the nearest half hour, they spent on each activity at the time of the survey. The constructs representing risky consumer behavioral attitudes were all measured using multiple-item measures that were previously validated in consumer research. They all employed five-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

RESULTS

The measures of the variables made it possible to assess the hypotheses with regression so ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used. Results of hypothesis testing can be seen in Table 1. The only hypothesis receiving no support was that the total hours a consumer spends per day using electronic devices of any kind does not cause a higher tendency toward exhibitionism.

Table 1: Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Risky CB Variables	Test Statistic
H1	Attitude toward Complaining	1.898**
H2	Entitlement	1.746**
H3	Exhibitionism	0.905
H4	Impulse Buying	1.912**
H5	Materialism	1.173*
H6	Risk Attraction	1.972**
H7	Variety-Seeking Tendency	2.003***

*Significant at $p \leq .10$

**Significant at $p \leq .05$

***Significant at $p \leq .01$

DISCUSSION

Marketers can incorporate these results into their understanding of consumers as a whole, as well as their own target markets. Regarding “Attitude Toward Complaining,” individuals who are electronically hyper-active in their own right should find it easy to complain about a business experience, especially with more review sites, such as Yelp and Angie’s List, at their disposal. Accordingly, marketers should pay added attention to this segment when trying to both procure them as a first-time buyer and retain them as a customer or run a greater risk of having your reputation tarnished.

The support of Hypothesis 2, “Entitlement,” speaks to the need for companies to provide special treatment to this segment. Dovetailing on their attitude on complaining, giving this group the VIP treatment could not only satisfy this need of expectation, but also ward off negative backlash and foster positive testimonials. On the surface, it may seem somewhat surprising that the risky behavior of “Exhibitionism” was the only one of the seven hypotheses not supported. Sending at least 120 text messages and spending at least three hours on social networking sites daily seems to indicate that someone is craving the attention of many different communities. But perhaps this finding demonstrates that these individuals may put more emphasis on belonging to a group.

The higher likelihood of this segment to impulse buy was supported, which is a signal that advertising in both text and social network formats could bear fruit. Though both methods are still in the infancy of their implementation and have experienced limited success to date, perhaps this is one reason why these tactics may become viable as their processes are refined. Materialism was also supported by this segment, which might bode well for marketers everywhere. But if this type of accentuated electronic activity does indeed reside predominantly in the domain of those in a lower socio-economic status, as [5] study found, then only those companies whose offerings address the needs and wants of that demographic may find their willingness to purchase useful.

The support of risk attraction can be viewed as a double-edge sword for marketers. On one hand, this segment may be more inclined to make an initial purchase given their lower barrier to risk, but because of this, they make register more severe cognitive dissonance and use their prowess at communicating electronically to express their frustration with their decision. Finally, variety-seeking tendency received the strongest support of all the behaviors. This finding would indicate that buyers from this segment are less likely to be brand loyal, so marketers will have to find more effective ways of retaining them. One strategy would be to build the relationship to be as interactive with an array of frequent new offerings to keep their attention focused on you and not a competitor.

CONCLUSION

This study is a preliminary step towards better understanding the behaviors of some of the most active consumers in social media. Though all but one of the hypotheses was supported, this research provides only indirect knowledge to help marketers. More work needs to be done to determine whether building relationships with the hyper-texter and hyper-networker is profitable, and if so, what are the best tactics by which to make these connections in a meaningful way.

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