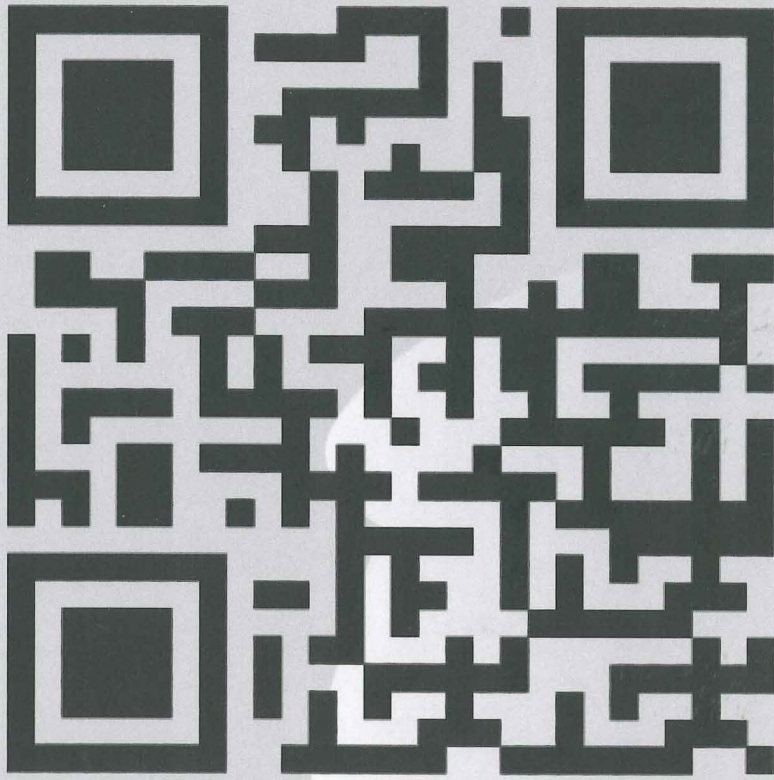


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COMPANIONS



# The Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption

Edited by  
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# 37

## AFTERWORD

### Consuming the digital

Tom Boellstorff

#### Keywords

digital consumerism, dubbing, ethnography

#### Introduction: "dubbing" the digital consumer

The thirty-six chapters making up this edited collection speak to a staggering range of interests in relation to digital consumerism. Since there is no way I can engage at length with any particular chapter, for this afterword I have set myself the goal of identifying shared problematics, interests, and avenues for inquiry. Of course, I approach this task in light of my own scholarly history. As an anthropologist who has conducted extensive research on questions of sexuality and national belonging in Indonesia (e.g., Boellstorff 2005, 2007), I have a longstanding interest in culture, mass media, and consumerism. For instance, in that work, I developed a notion of "dubbing culture," drawn from a debate where the dubbing of foreign films and television shows into the Indonesian language was briefly banned on the grounds that if Indonesians saw Westerners appearing to "speak Indonesian," they would no longer know where Indonesia ended and the West began (Boellstorff 2003).

I have used this concept of "dubbing culture" to theorize forms of globalization where two systems of meaning lie alongside each other without fusing. The difference between dubbing and translation is that while translation is animated by the impossible hope of a total shift from one language to another, in dubbing the moving lips never match with the new soundtrack, nor is there an expectation this will happen. I have found this concept of transformation not predicated on fusion helpful in my research on virtual worlds, particularly my book *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008). In this book and more recent work on ethnographic methods for virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al. 2012), I explore the "dubbing" of practices and meanings across the physical/virtual divide. These interests resonate with themes evident in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption*.

#### New frontiers of consumption and consuming

It should not be surprising that novel forms of consumerism represent a strong common thread linking the contributions to this volume. At stake on these digital frontiers are not just new

markets, but new understandings of consumption and the commodity form. How, for instance, are notions of "searching" displacing notions of "shopping," such that to shop online and to search online are, in effect, the same activity? This has implications for how we conceive of "choice," a pivotal term of contemporary capitalism that links consumerism to democracy, self-identity, and knowledge production.

Of special interest is that we now face a situation where consumption not only can be enabled by technology (like the steamship allowing for new forms of distribution), but can take place within a digital technology itself. From posting on Facebook to building something in a virtual world or even commenting on a news blog, we encounter new possibilities for virtual locations of consumption—the "markets" without which the concept of "marketing" is meaningless. The very notion of "social media" thus no longer captures how many of these technologies are not media at all: they do not "mediate" between different places, but are (virtual) locations in their own right. In other cases, consumption can take place through associated digital venues (e.g., a fan site for a video game or television show). All this has fundamental consequences for how we theorize value, given the key role of technology in the emergence of modern capitalism. Ideas of marketing and advertising are similarly transformed in the context of the "viral" dissemination of product messages. The viral metaphor presents a parasitic image of agent-less, uncontrolled propagation that obscures the forms of collaborative activity involved in these ostensibly non-directed activities. How are we to understand socialities that have not just "gone online" but have "gone viral?" How do they differ (or not) from forms of rumor, myth, and informal circulation that preexist but also lie alongside digital forms of informal dissemination?

These new digital possibilities for the location of consumption transform the products or services to be consumed, and thus the distinction between purchase and use. For instance, how does blogging rework the temporalities and consuming implications of "fashion?" How is the experience of gambling altered when it can take place online, such that persons can gamble alone, or teenagers can gamble at home with their families? Another area where we are seeing a qualitative transformation in consumption is the rise of virtual goods. These include commodities that historically (and often still) have physical-world forms, like books, magazines, and songs. However, they can also include items without physical-world analogs, such as clothing for avatars or virtual-world homes.

A key issue is that the "digital" is no longer limited to computing devices found on a desktop. Just as desktop computing overshadowed an earlier phase of mainframe computing (though mainframe computers still exist), so desktop and laptop computers are now becoming but one aspect of a digital ecology that includes mobile devices like smart phones and tablets, and also the embedding of networked computational power into everyday objects. How are notions of the public and domestic being transformed in the context of these technologies? These new layerings of place are intimately linked to layerings of activity and engagement that give new valence to the term "multitasking."

### Constituting the digital consumer

Many contributions to this volume show how linked to digital consumerism are emergent technologies of selfhood that destabilize the very notion of the consuming person so central to articulations of contemporary capitalism. Here as elsewhere there is a pressing need to avoid, on one hand, the Scylla of presuming a postmodern human that radically breaks from the predigital human, and on the other, the Charybdis of radical continuity, where digital sociality is presumed to be merely superficially distinct from that which came before. These conceptual agendas center on the question of causality: the interplay between how technology amplifies or reflects aspects of

society, and how various social formations are enabled by (or even predicated on) digital technologies. This includes the interplay between new forms of creativity versus templates and defaults that canalize social difference.

These questions reflect how our understanding of what it means to be human will shift as we consider forms of selfhood and sociality where online and offline engagements intertwine. For instance, it is not just that social media shape consumer behavior, but that "social" is taking on new meanings. For more people around the world, in some contexts at least, to be "social" means to be "online." This has already had consequences for intimate spheres of life ranging from dating to the "virtual mourning" of the deceased.

The contributions to this volume underscore how in regard to the social construction of the digital consumer, it will prove crucial to examine differences across online technologies and environments. For instance, social networking sites (like Facebook), online games (like World of Warcraft), and virtual worlds (like Second Life) differ in key ways. We cannot assume that consumerism associated with one of these technologies will translate straightforwardly to the others. Yet it is important to examine similarities as well: an intellectual balkanization would lose sight of how these technologies share histories and current features. Notions of avatar embodiment are largely shared between online games and virtual worlds, and influence notions of "profiles" on social networking sites. A distinction between live "chat" and sending "messages" exists across a range of technologies. We thus find the entire spectrum of sameness and difference, from things shared by everything "digital" to things specific to a particular website or online game, or even to a subculture associated with that website or game. Our research agendas and conceptual frameworks must be similarly broad. This includes taking into account the impact of narrowband technologies like texting, which at present are far more commonly used than technologies like virtual worlds. It also includes taking into account forms of "polymedia" where digital consumers use multiple online technologies (Miller 2011, p. 200), often at the same time or even nested inside each other (such as the use of texting inside a social network or within an online game).

It will remain important to track how uses of digital technologies differ by social categories like ethnicity, nation, age, and gender, but it will also be pivotal to consider as well how these categories are shaped by the digital. For instance, the English-language category of the "tween" is hard to separate from online practices, given its origin and widespread adoption during the rise of the Internet in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The way digital technologies get taken up in varied cultural contexts will not be apparent at the outset. Given the dominance of the West, the United States, and even California in the design and conception of many of these technologies, the question of how they are transformed in non-Western contexts is an important topic for continuing research. For instance, issues of exchange, sharing, and sociocentric selfhood work differently in cultural contexts that in certain respects anticipated the rise of the kinds of distributed subjectivity made possible by Internet technologies. An issue that can get lost in these kinds of "Western versus non-Western" conversations is that we are also witnessing the emergence of cultural formations that are ontologically predicated on the digital, and thus cannot be reduced to any combination of physical world cultures.

### Participation, control, and context

Consumerism has always been a social phenomenon, and many contributors to this volume address how forms of participation shape digital consumerism. For instance, we can think of blogs both as something consumed and as sites for consuming other products. In my own work, I have developed the notion of "creationist capitalism" to highlight how forms of crafting and creativity

have become central to digital consumer practice (Boellstorff 2008, pp. 205–11). In other words, it is not just that people use digital technologies to create; it is that the very notion of “creating” has shifted. Consumer participation can include highly individualized labor but also forms of “crowdsourced” activity. Here, novel conceptions of sociality, context, and labor intersect with consequences still not fully understood. Even the notion of “audience” is put into question by these developments, since those at the “receiving” end of content are, through forms of commentary, remixing, fandom, and amateur creation, involved in simultaneous production. Could these developments herald the emergence of new forms of consumer exploitation made paradoxically feasible through “collaboration?”

One area where the role of digital technologies in consumption is of particular interest is in fields like medicine, where a significant gap in knowledge and expertise historically separated provider (doctor) from consumer (patient). The sphere of investing and finance is another example, a clear case where the activity itself (the trading of stocks, for instance) is fundamentally altered by digital technologies. This has consequences for notions of consumer activism that can have interweaving online and offline components, while also reconfiguring notions of value. Indeed, several contributors to this volume compel us to ask how control might in fact now represent a form of consumption. This relates to notions of sharing, but also to notions of secrecy and the contextual revealing of aspects of selfhood. It also recalls the rise of the database as not just repository, but active form of social organization that becomes its own context, such that data mining techniques can be used by marketers to conceptualize consumers in their online, real-time socialities.

Context can become a form of surveillance, as online retailers can track not just purchasing histories, but clicks through webpages and how much time is spent on various portions of a website. This in turn can lead to forms of preferential filtering, so that different consumers see, in effect, a different Amazon or Google based upon their past engagements with the digital technology in question. We may be seeing the normalization of surveillance as the *de facto* experience of online sociality. This has important consequences for notions of privacy. It is clear that persons still value privacy when online, but that the meaning of privacy can become highly contextual and distributed, transforming the very notion of self-disclosure. Who is the “self” that “discloses” online? This has implications for how we conceptualize online consumer movements and other forms of consumer activism, as well as the relationship between trust and privacy.

### Methods and theories

The various contributors to this volume both summarize existing research from a wide range of disciplines and, in many cases, report on original research the authors themselves have conducted. That research draws upon a palette of methodological approaches including, for instance, surveys and archival research. This is entirely fitting. No one method is perfect: each permits insights into differing aspects of the social. Indeed, the phrase “mixed methods” has become superfluous, since practically all social research projects nowadays employ eclectic toolkits shaped by the perceived needs of the research.

As an ethnographer I am particularly fascinated to see the growing interest in ethnographic methods for researching digital consumerism. “Ethnography” is not a method but the written product of a set of methods, as the suffix “-graphy” indicates. The core method of any ethnographic approach is participant observation. The particular power of this method is that because it is not predicated on elicitation, it allows the researcher to explore commonalities but also divergences between what people “say they do” and “what they do.” This helps us avoid presuming not

only that people truthfully answer surveys, but that motivations and beliefs are always present to consciousness in the first place.

As many contributions to this volume demonstrate, ethnographic projects usually include other methods alongside the core method of participant observation, for instance, individual interviews. It bears emphasizing that many ethnographers like myself find group interviews (sometimes known as “focus groups”) extremely useful. This is the clearest example to my knowledge of an ethnographic method that we owe to the field of market research (Kratz 2010). As I and my colleagues discuss elsewhere (see Boellstorff *et al.* 2012), focus groups provide several specific advantages for ethnographers. Since no culture is unanimous, they provide a means to explore debate and dissent in what might otherwise appear to be a homogeneous culture. They also are useful for oral history work because participants can help fill in gaps in the knowledge of the other members. It is clear that group interviews can play an important role in charting new cultures of digital consumerism.

Overall, these questions of method are crucial because consumerism is often associated with promotion and hype, and thus slippages between descriptive and proscriptive forms of argument—between claims of what “what is” and “what should be.” Careful methodological design allows social researchers (including those involved in market research) to avoid these slippages by grounding claims in a descriptive register, allowing us to better understand cultural phenomena in their real contexts of offline and online emergence.

### Conclusion

Overall, the contributors to this volume suggest not just new topics for research, but new theoretical frameworks to guide such research. Cultures always have a history and persons draw upon that history when confronted by novel contexts. That is why, for instance, in the world of computing we speak of “desktops,” “folders,” and web “pages,” or even send a “carbon copy” (cc) of an e-“mail.” But while such antiquated metaphors for the objects of study amuse, there is a real danger for researchers when our theoretical resources are similarly dated.

There undoubtedly exist a range of possible negative consequences of digital technology and sociality. However, many of the more dismissive or dystopic interpretations are based on a mismatch between theoretical framework and empirical reality. For instance, many concerns about isolation in regard to the use of digital technologies fail to ask how the very meaning of “isolation” is not eternally unchanging, but is itself a cultural phenomenon reshaped by the rise of digital technologies. Similarly, asking after the “influence” of digital technologies must be accompanied by an awareness of how understandings of “influence” are themselves transformed in contexts where persons routinely “follow” or “like” each other’s postings in online media, or where forms of modding, hacking, and remixing destabilize any neat distinction between those who are the influencers and those who are influenced. It is by considering these kinds of complex, emergent dynamics through careful empirical and conceptual work that we will attain a robust understanding of the promises and perils of digital consumerism.

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## INDEX

- Abbas, Yasmine 4
- Abercrombie, N. 172
- accidental influentials 126
- Achohido, R. 335
- Acquisti, A. 336
- action nets 162–63
- activation 163
- active audience theory 173, 174
- activism 5, 9, 356–66, 386–95, 418
- actor-network theory 42, 163
- Adams, E. 298
- "adaptive immigrants" 9
- addiction: online gambling 265; online games 299; text messaging 84
- Adler, P.S. 161, 361
- Adomavicius, G. 127
- Adorno, Theodor 87
- adult fans of LEGO (AFOLs) 309–15
- advertising: behavioral 335, 340; cognitive load 370; consumer surveillance 321, 329; culture jamming 357–58; images of women 382; information search 238; mobile 339; multitasking 371, 372, 373–74; trust and distrust 407, 410; tweens 379; viral propagation 275, 277, 416; *see also* marketing
- advocating 176
- AFOLs *see* adult fans of LEGO
- African-Americans 187–88, 189
- age: computer-based voice communication 22; computers used as TV 20, 21; gamers 297; Internet dating 188; mobile phone use 22, 23; multitasking 374; online news readers 17, 19; paperless households 19, 20; photo digitization 22–25; privacy concerns 340; *see also* young people
- agency: children 116; fans 292; free will 47; investors 210, 214, 216; objects 398
- Ahoren 126
- AI *see* Amnesty International
- Aint-It-Cool-News.com 289
- Albinsson, Pia A. 356–66
- Albright, J.A. 186
- Alexander, J. 149–50
- algorithms 105, 124, 125, 127, 128–29, 131, 320, 352
- alienation 7, 90
- alignment of interests 166, 168
- aliveness 44, 400
- Allport, G.W. 279
- Alpha users 126
- Alterovitz, S. 188
- Altman, I. 353
- Amazon: consumer desire 227, 229; preferential filtering 418; recommendations 8, 127, 161; reviews 124; sales ranking 129; social commerce 128; surveillance 319–20, 322, 323–25, 326, 327–29, 351
- American Idol* 8, 162, 177
- Ameritrade 208, 219
- Amnesty International (AI) 356–57
- Anderson, Chris 6, 352
- Andrade, J. 372
- Andrejevic, Mark 320, 322, 326, 327, 351, 352
- Android 90
- anonymity 350, 352; cash purchasing 320; digital self 349; online gambling 31, 262
- anorexia nervosa 150, 152, 153, 155
- Ansari, A. 127
- Antonijevic, S. 56
- Antorini, Yun Mi 308–16
- AOL 359
- Appadurai, Arjun 74
- Apple 4, 8, 308, 314–15
- apps 4, 5