

EXPLORING CONSUMERS' HABITUAL BEHAVIOR THROUGH A SMARTPHONE EMBARGO

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ABSTRACT

The heart of learning is experience. Whether it is the experience of discussions in the classroom, studying for an examination, working on a project with other students, or pursuing and reflecting on a task independently, the experience can be transformative and lead to new knowledge and insights. The National Day of Unplugging is an event held annually in March. It provided an opportunity for graduate students in a business creativity course to participate and confront, for what has become a habitual consumer behavior to many, an ongoing and near constant use of a smartphone. Participation in the Day experience afforded students the opportunity to gain perspective on their own consumer behavior of technology while providing information relevant to subsequent classroom discussions. The current article presents student reactions to the event and commentary on its use as a pedagogical tool for other instructors to potentially use in their classrooms for discussion and/or replication.

INTRODUCTION

During a summer course in Business Creativity for a small cohort of MBA students, one of the learning goals was to have a more in-depth discussion that touched on several consumer behavior-related themes. The AACSB accredited institution, a medium-sized university in the Southern part of the United States offers weeknight, weekend, and executive MBA programs to part-time students in the area.

More specifically, the goal was to explore the impact of increasingly dominating modern technology and the need for marketing practice and practitioners to adapt when confronting habitual behaviors. In order to better understand this, beyond a general discussion or surface-level observations, students needed to be challenged to make the topic more personal. Additionally, having all of the students share a common experience likely would facilitate a better discussion overall once the group was reassembled in the classroom. Given that one of the learning goals of the degree program overall and part of our assurance of learning for AACSB accreditation relates to “fostering reflective thinking,” finding the right task was the key.

Approximately two decades ago general news reports documented the National Day of Unplugging. The project is an outgrowth of The Sabbath Manifesto, an adaption of the Jewish practice of reserving one day a week to unwind, unplug, relax, reflect, get outdoors, and connect with loved ones. Created by Reboot, a nonprofit Jewish community, the Day was originally established in 2003 for people of all or no faiths ([Anonymous, 2020](#)).

The intent behind the program was to challenge people to keep their electronic devices unplugged and unused for 24 hours for a global vacation from technology. It attempted to

highlight the value of disconnecting from digital devices to better connect (or reconnect with), loved ones and communities in real time (Reboot Website, 2020).

In addition to maintaining the website and supporting the day of unplugging from technology Reboot currently offers a free, cloth cell phone sleeping bag for those who want to focus on the smartphone as the focus of their unplugging experience.

BACKGROUND

Generally speaking, student do not possess much background information on the topic of tech addition or smartphone withdrawal beyond anecdotal incidents. Exploration of potential linkages of tech usage to other facets of addiction is not new (Drennan & James, 2005). Issues of self-esteem and social rewards motivations at the heart of other addictions and withdrawal difficulties have also been examined (Chen 2020). As the instructor I did not want to introduce the topic beforehand since it might impact the students' firsthand experiences. Afterward however, and in conjunction with discussion of their journal observations, several articles (e.g. Archer, 2017; Lang, 2017; Stibel, 2017) were introduced to give context and scope to the issue – particularly with respect to their undergraduate compatriots who have been involved with smartphone technology either for a longer period or who were introduced to it at a younger age.

The assignment is novel, even given the widespread introduction of the smartphone (as we now know it) some approximately thirteen years ago with the first Apple iPhone. As Steve Jobs himself noted at the iPhone's introduction in January 2007 at the San Francisco MacWorld conference there were devices called smartphones (e.g. Moto Q, Blackberry, Palm Treo, Nokia E62) on the market however they weren't very smart (Steve Jobs presentation, 2007). His announcement and presentation represents the availability of the first true smartphone as consumers now conceive it.

The novelty of the assignment stems from tapping into a habit that has had sufficient time to become significantly engrained into people's lives and of sufficient scope to impact how they perform a variety of tasks, both on a personal and a professional level. Unlike other technology, such as an electronic calculator or a laptop personal computer, the smartphone's handheld status and functionality with complementary technologies give rise to issues related to addiction (Kumar & Mondal, 2018 among others). As social media platforms' role in forming and maintaining social identity have been formalized (Dutot, 2020) the experience and reflection on the smartphones' role in peoples' lives is worth exploring. The task in question looks at students' ability to do without it as a basis for classroom discussion.

STUDENT TASK

Asking students to alter their behavior, in some instances drastically and even for a short time, can be difficult. Exhibit 1 presents the instructions students were provided to follow. An attempt was made to balance the constraints of asking people (working, part-time graduate students) to alter their behavior by not using their smartphone for a 24-hour period and the

potential emergency needs that might arise. The goal was introspection and reflection while not putting anyone's safety, job performance, or psychological comfort unnecessarily at risk.

Aside from the instruction sheet, each student was supplied with a cell phone sleeping bag, obtained through contact with Reboot at no charge for use in the classroom. They were asked to complete the task with a 24-hour window of their choosing before the next class meeting, approximately two weeks later.

Exhibit 1


ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS


Smartphone Embargo

1. Put your name on one of the smartphone sleeping bags I'm distributing in class.
2. Examine your schedule for the remainder of the month of June. Select one 24-hour period where you believe you will have the best chance of "surviving" without access to your smartphone. You may begin any day of the week and at any time during the day or night.
3. When that time arrives, write the start date and time on the smartphone sleeping bag and put your smartphone inside.
4. During this 24-hour period you are not to use your own or anyone else's smartphone or cell phone. You may use a landline phone, pay phone, or desk phone at work (if your one day is a work day). You may use a laptop or desktop computer for email or the internet. If you have a camera separate from a phone device you may use it.

Keep in mind that "borrowing" someone else's smartphone, using a work smartphone for personal use, or asking someone else to run a search or check your email with you looking over their shoulder are all considered cheating behaviors.

5. During this one day period, you should keep a written record (in a small notebook – yes pen and paper) of your observations. How is your behavior changed if at all, do you feel differently, do you notice things around you that you typically don't, do you think about things more or differently, etc. Your goal is to evaluate the experience.
6. If, at any time during the 24 hour designated period you find that you cannot go further with this assignment you may stop and remove your smartphone from the sleeping bag however you must write the date and time you do so on the bag. Further you must write down why you stopped the assignment as well as any feelings, or other observations you experienced for later inclusion in your memo to me.
7. Email me a single spaced memo on or before July 5th with the following information. Note: I suspect these memos will be in the 1-2 page range.
 - a. When you started the assignment and why you selected the date and time you did?
 - b. When you completed the assignment and if earlier than 24 hours, why you stopped.
 - c. Any notes or observations you noted in your record about what you saw, felt, observed, etc. about the experience.
8. Best of luck!





Of course, in case of a true emergency you may discontinue participation in the assignment. After all, this is meant to be an exploration and reflection on behavior and its potential impact on creativity.

RESULTS

The experience and reflection on the task is at the heart of fulfilling the stated learning objective of fostering reflective thinking. Salient experiences provide for more in-depth and richer points of discussion than mere pondering of a subject or considering something one has read. In this the task project allows for a better and more complete accomplishing of the learning objective.

The analysis of the data in this exploratory study was limited to a qualitative analysis of the respondent journals. Chronicling the most significant observations and reasons for deviations from protocol are presented in Exhibit 2. A search for common themes was noted and presented as part of Exhibit 3. The relatively small number of participants precluded a meaningful Word Cloud analysis.

Exhibit 2 RESPONDENT BEHAVIORS							
Gender	Age	Start	End	Under	Full 24 hrs	Over	Interruption in Experiment
Male	52	4:00 a.m. Friday	7:00 a.m. Friday	21 hrs.			Need to use camera to document work product
Male	39	6:00 p.m. Monday	6:00 p.m. Tuesday		Yes, but		2 minute lapse – forgot about embargo
Male	33	5:30 a.m. Tuesday	6:00 a.m. Wednesday		Yes	½ hr.	
Male	33	8:31 p.m. Saturday	10:05 p.m. Saturday	23 ½ hrs.			Self-admitted “addicted” to phone
Male	33	8:30 p.m. Friday	8:30 p.m. Saturday		Yes		
Male	31	9:46 p.m. Saturday	9:47 p.m. Sunday		Yes	1 min.	
Male	31	3:15 p.m. Saturday	9:45 p.m. Sunday		Yes	6 ½ hrs.	
Male	31	7:00 p.m. Saturday	7:00 p.m. Sunday		Yes		
Male	31	5:00 p.m. Wednesday	5:00 p.m. Thursday		Yes		
Female	50	5:30 a.m. Friday	7:30 a.m. Saturday		Yes	2 hrs.	
Female	41	9:00 p.m. Thursday	6:00 p.m. Friday	3 hrs.	No		Family Issue
Female	37	10:00 p.m. Tuesday	10:30 p.m. Wednesday		Yes	½ hr.	
Female	36	8:55 p.m. Friday	8:55 p.m. Saturday		Yes		
Female	26	8:00 p.m. Saturday	8:00 p.m. Sunday		Yes		

Exhibit 3 SELECT STUDENT JOURNAL THEMES AND QUOTES	
Hesitation, trepidation, apprehension	Some of the most meaningful things came before the exercise actually began. As I started thinking about it I really began to feel very strongly that I didn't want to do it.
Strategic planning as minimizing tactic	What day to pick, around 4 th of July holiday, choose weekend to avoid work issues, early in morning, late at night to take advantage of sleeping?
Ingrained behavior	Kept tapping my pocket to make sure it (the phone) was there. I forgot about the project for two minutes, grabbed my wife's phone and began to look up a site. It was fascinating to me that using cell phones has become so common that I could grab the phone and start surfing without realizing what I was doing; the reaction was almost involuntary.
Realizations	I found that in certain moments I was more fully "in" than others. I found myself engaging with my kids more. It wasn't just easier to find more time to spend time with family. It was also easier to find time to read. Not having my device I noticed during lull times that in the past I reserved for text messages or social media statuses I found myself taking quick walks outside. It was a great mental break from the day. It inspired imagination and appreciation of the day as opposed to being pushed information relevant or not from a 4.5 inch display.
Things learned	I really have thought about turning all my weekends into smartphone free weekends. I discovered that if you aren't going to use your smartphone you have to plan more effectively. I had to communicate with my wife about our plans for the day and ensure we had a schedule worked out in advance. They are a convenience but we rely on them to "think" for us too often. It is a great tool to deal with unforeseen circumstances in your day.
Surprises	At a social occasion I noticed that just about everyone was using their phones – taking pictures, giving someone map directions, etc. Going to sleep that night was very easy. Not having access to my smartphone allowed for a good night of rest.
Misc.	My one true observation from the embargo is that I am thankful that God has afforded me the insight to realize smartphones and their limitless uses have their place and attractive qualities, but do not consume the majority of my day. I texted my parents with the message that I was turning my phone off for 24 hours and if there is an emergency to call my wife. Within 60 seconds of powering my phone down my wife turns to me and says "your parents are wondering why you aren't using your phone."

Toward the end of the day I felt I had accomplished so many things and had a productive day.

I named my smartphone Freida. I had to name my phone because my wife feels that Frida is the other woman in my life so providing her an identity seems appropriate.

When it comes to challenges or student concerns about being able to complete or even partially complete the task, this project enhances the potential for meaningful learning and reflection. It is specifically the possibility that students may not be able to accomplish this task to its fullest degree that opens the door for insights. As Exhibits 2 and 3 reflect, students had varying degrees of problems and issues, including an unconscious action to use their smartphone on one respondent's part. Because the grade for this assignment is not specifically linked to completing the 24-hour embargo itself but rather the quality of their completed journal documenting and reflecting on the experience, the varied nature of different students' experiences provides the raw material for the in-class discussion.

As noted in the instructions given to students, they were given the choice of when to schedule their 24-hour embargo. Both from the resulting journals submitted for review and grading and Exhibit 2 it was readily observed that students did employ one of several strategies for minimizing the negative impact of changing their behavior to complete the assignment.

Weekends were used for minimizing or eliminating complications related to limiting technology when in a work environment. Overnight strategies were also employed to take advantage of natural sleeping time when the need to consult their smartphone would be lessened.

Vacation time for one individual and the occurrence of a national holiday, Independence Day, for another explained why their chosen 24-hour embargo period occurred during the week. It also partially explains or supports the contention that for many they would have a difficult time giving up their technology and that it may have become habitual behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

The classroom discussions on consumer behavior, habitual behavior, and technology that followed the completion of this assignment were very productive. Students referred to their experience as well as to experiences of other people in their households who attempted to participate in the project. They drew on concepts from the after-project assigned readings, leading to a successful learning experience.

The learning goal of fostering reflective thinking is not the sole purview of marketing, or reserved to any one field of business or academic study. This project could be employed in any number of courses across the marketing curriculum – from consumer behavior to marketing research or from integrated marketing communications to marketing strategy. The personal nature and active learning aspects of the project also make it one ripe for replication in many a different classrooms. Future studies with a sufficiently larger subject pool and the collection of more comprehensive demographic and psychographic data will allow for more robust data analysis.

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