

**“Got any piggy sound effects? Always amusing. Oink Moo Quak”
Exploring Consumer Interactivity in Response to Campaigns Coupling Ubiquitous
Media**

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Abstract

Consumers use mobile phones to interact with media related content. We explore their interactive response with radio content using the LOOP model that defines interactivity as: synchronicity, two-way dialogue, contingency, and control. We use the text data of 24 consumers who over a 3 year period had texted into the radio station. We found that being interactive creates a sense of belongingness to a community. The interactions between participants are symbolic of the relationship between siblings and ‘best friends’. Interactivity is driven by self congruity and the communities shared aim; co-creation of the avant-garde. They protect and must feel in control of the content but also the way the community is perceived and behaves. The interactive experience is optimized when two-way dialogue is contingent and synchronous for station, consumer and community. Involved and in control of the content and process of interactivity. The research implications are discussed.

Key Words: interactivity, mobile, radio, LOOP, TXT data.

Introduction

The use of the mobile channel for advertising is increasing at significant rates (Economist, 2007; Trappey and Woodside, 2005). This channel creates opportunities for building a process of two-way continuous interactivity with consumers when the mobile channel is coupled with other media channels (e.g., TV, Radio, Web) (Nysveen, Pedersen and Thorbjørnsen 2005; Balasubramanian, Peterson and Jarvenpaa 2002; Watson, Pitt, Berthon and Zinkhan 2002). These types of campaigns are called *LOOPS* (Davis and Sajtos, 2008). In the *LOOP*, the audience is encouraged by the advertisement and other content to interact with the brand by sending a message response in the form of SMS (text message), MMS (multimedia message), or VMS (video message) (Barwise and Strong, 2002). Despite these developments in marketing practice, little is known in the literature about consumer interactivity in response to *LOOP* campaigns (Ferris 2007). Recent research has focused on the characteristics of consumer interactivity and the effectiveness of campaigns coupling the mobile and television media (Davis and Sajtos, 2008). Despite the contribution, no attention has been given to these types of campaigns when other media channels (e.g., Radio) are coupled with the mobile. This research seeks to overcome this gap by exploring the impact of *LOOP* campaigns on the consumers' interactive response. We focus on a ubiquitous coupling context, that is, mobile and radio. The papers structure is as follows. We begin to define interactivity's 4 key properties in the *LOOP* context. The method is explained, ending with a discussion of the key findings and research implications.

Understanding Interactivity

In the *LOOP*, where the communication is between the consumer and marketer, the mobile phone is a one-to-one device by which an individual consumer responds to an individual firm/marketer offer. In this process the mobile phone fulfils a feedback function, which allows one-way communication but enables receivers (consumers) to participate in the communication process. However, there are no guarantees that the sender (marketer) will respond individually. Therefore, interactivity has to go beyond what this environment (channel) can offer and, by definition it should start with the basic assumption that it is a **two-way communication**. This research proposes that in the *LOOP* there are two, one-way communication models, which, although fundamentally different, converge to make a two-way responsive dialogue model (McMillan, 2002). But to establish interactivity one would expect that the real interaction would involve more *LOOP*'s to be completed between consumer and marketer, which implies that we would expect them to interact simply more and continuously, as well as more quickly. This means that marketer and audience have to act and react to each other in a continuous manner, which brings a new feature into the interactivity equation, the temporal dimension. The temporal dimension focuses on responsiveness (Rafaeli, 1988): for a conversation to evolve, feedback should be immediate (Shih 1998). They assert that the immediate succession of action and reaction reinforces interactivity, which Alba et al., (1997) refers to as response within seconds. Therefore, we also have to take into account how quickly they interact. This feature is referred to as **synchronicity**. Synchronicity is enhanced when marketers implement flexible programming that encourages a 'conversation' with consumers (Trappey and Woodside, 2005) to maintain the sense of interactivity of an otherwise passive audience (Hoffman and Novak, 1996).

Some authors stress that marketers have to make consumers active (Liu and Shrum 2002; Van Dijk and de Vos 2001), which brings us to the concept of **control**. Control can be considered from the perspective of the marketer as well as the consumer. Even though it is the same phenomenon, the two actors see different sides of it. Control is a basic requirement and a desirable outcome from the side of the marketer, who controls what information is

requested and the choices that can be made by the consumer. It is a way of influencing the communicated content. To encourage consumers into synchronistic communication, marketers employing the *LOOP* in strategic communications should be adept at allowing the consumer to control the nature and outcome of interactivity (Van Dijk and de Vos 2001; Bordewijk and Kaam 1986). By allowing the consumer to control interactivity, the traditionally passive audience is transformed into one that is actively in control and participating.

In mutual discourse or interpersonal communication (Hoffman and Novak, 1996) the sender and receiver roles are clearly distinguished (McMillan, 2002) and this was our approach in defining the concept of interactivity. However, with regard to the control feature, it should be pointed out that this distinction has a detrimental impact on the interactivity process. This means that the consumer should not be only considered as the receiver of the message, but as a co-creator of the message content and mediated experience. Therefore, this research proposes that control can be maintained in the *LOOP* if the customer is perceived to have control without being conscious of it. In reality, the value of this interactivity for the consumer is “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time” (Hoffman and Novak 1996, p. 84). This characteristic is called **contingency**, that is, the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages (Rafaeli, 1998). In a contingent interactive process, both actors seek a certain benefit; the marketer stimulates the consumer to interact and seeks economic and informational benefits, whilst the consumer chooses to interact and seeks involvement and/or entertainment benefits (Trappey and Woodside, 2005).

Method

Our analysis is guided by these 4 properties of interactivity as well as the process of using grounded theory as the mode of analysis (Yin, 1994). We use grounded theory in tandem with an emerging conceptual model because of the lack of tested theory regarding interactive *LOOP* campaigns. Therefore, while we are searching for further evidence of the 4 properties of interactivity, our analysis seeks emerging propositions regarding the nature of interactivity in this ubiquitous media context. Grounded theory was employed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to enable them to discover theory from data rather than having to proceed by quantitatively testing hypotheses derived from the work of a few specialised theorists (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Miles and Huberman (1994) state that grounded theory fits into the social anthropology approach to qualitative data analysis; the emphasis is on the genesis or refinement of theory, and the conceptual framework should emerge from the field in the course of the study. The grounded theory method is valid empirically because the process of conceptual development is bound to evidence and “grounded in the reality of experience” (Gummesson, 1999; Eisenhardt, 1989; 1991). Operationally, the following process of analysis was applied. A dataset was obtained from 95BFM (www.95bfm.com), referred to as the ‘B’ in the dataset by consumers. The data set included; the consumers’ mobile number, time and the txt sent to the radio station. This dataset was screened on the basis that an individual must have been interactive with the radio station over the full 3 year period (from April of 2003 and October 2005). In 2010, this exact type of campaign is still a key part of this stations interactive marketing strategy, 24-7. This reduced the data to the responses of 24 individuals with a total of 9741 text messages. The analysis employed techniques advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Yin (1994). A coding scheme was developed and emblematic vignettes were then associated with the emerging codes. The process and conclusions were reviewed by both researchers to ensure validity.

Results and Discussion

In our initial exploration of the impact of this type of *LOOP* campaign on the consumers' interactive response, we found that being interactive with the station creates a strong sense of belongingness and bond to a community and 'family'. As one consumer argued;

“Just ignore those negative comments. [B] Rocks! They aint part of the B Family, they're just a little uninformed! We love you though! :)”

The consumers satisfy the need to communicate and express their thoughts with the station. They feel in **control**, not just in the content of the stations broadcast, but in the way that community is perceived and behaves. Interactivity, in fact, makes the station a social hub, a facilitator and an enabler. In a way, the *LOOP* transforms the broadcast medium into a social medium through which they can experience and participate in entertainment, information, news and be part of a conversation that is **contingent**. The mass broadcast content in a way is transformed into discussion between consumer and station. Through facilitating **two way dialogues** that are **contingent** with the audiences' response, the station is perceived to be a knowledgeable information source: a receiver that is not only listening and a form of confidante but through **synchronous contingent dialogue**, interactivity with the station is perceived to be **conversation**. This experience of interactivity also provides a way for consumers to escape and to pass the daily routine with ease.

To stimulate **two-way dialogue**, the consumer likes to ask personal questions and give opinions to the station. The expectation is for a **contingent response**. The consumer 'shouts-out' indicating that the dialogue is also with the communities other listening consumers. Shout-outs include sending in hellos, good mornings, good nights, requests, updates on any events (traffic, current affairs, personal events, personal thoughts, personal experiences or daily routine) and praise to the station (comparison of other stations). Consumers often send messages frequently just to say hello to the host as well as updating them and the community on their physical whereabouts and what they are currently doing. This type of interactivity indicates the importance of time and space in the **contingent dialogue**. It contradicts with the ubiquitous nature of the two mediums. Radio and mobiles allow for ubiquitous communication. However, the consumer appears to need to indicate some physical reference point in time and space. It appears that they communicate this reference point to the station so that it will influence other consumers attached to the hub and family. Being located somewhere 'cool' have some esteem value.

What do the consumers gain from being part of this family? Social value is gained from a strong bond with the station, hosts, content and family. The interactivity helps to define and reinforce self concept. Consumers further define this interactivity by the use of self defined symbols that seemingly only the station and family can understand. There is a plethora of icons and symbols which consumers use to express their selves or define their sense of identity. The style of texting is also noted. Some were formal, some did not make sense and some were in text language. For example;

“We i on the wrap, not goin to hurl a religious directives, something more important .ok. Must be brave SMILE” [09/15/2004 11:02:51 AM - 3].

Also, being part of the family means that there is some form of collective efficacy. Some messages define someone who is not “B” enough or not in the B family. The consumer and family appear to believe that the group collectively has some shared goal. Possibly, this shared aim drives the **contingent dialogue**. Interactivity also has emotional value through the

arousal of feelings or affective states. For example, there is a feeling of pride and camaraderie between the consumer and the station. Their relationship with the station seems nostalgic. This relationship and sense of the history is also fiercely protected. This is shown when a host does not fit in with the consumer's perception of what it means to be hosts for the B. Consumers interact quickly to control. The passive becomes aggressive;

“Fuck off 2 the rock” [05/25/2005 08:28:43 AM - 8].

“Rob zombie on the B? Begone 2 the rock” [11/19/2003 07:47:33 AM - 8].

When there is a sense of congruity in the LOOPs interactivity, there is a clear sense of respect felt by the consumers. For example;

“Morning mr sundae. Ta 4 yr txt re rocking chair. Put me in gd mood 2. Wot other station cares enuf 2 reply 2 txts...how about vooom, the 1 w high pitch chorus” [12/19/2003 06:39:44 AM - 8].

Contingency is also driven by the need to understand. It arouses curiosity, novelty and satisfies a desire for knowledge. This may be the core of the collective efficacy. The station prides itself on being the avant-garde. The consumer values the co-creation of the avant-garde. The contingency of the conversation is elicited and un-elicited. For example;

“The rockin' & rollin wire! faith in SOUNDS nothing like it WE THINK love & smiles great to be back G slides” [10/15/2004 01:08:41 PM - 3] and

“CHEERS IT'S Friday. Good Grief FRIDAY have one to Us, the Music & Musos of the Nirvana rocking soul We to You” [10/15/2004 01:29:38 PM - 3].

The conversation is also randomly driven by the consumers. They bring in ideas and inspirations for the station to build upon. Often, the consumers will interact to reaffirm the station (relative to other mainstream stations) and show dismay when they perceive that a host falls short of what a B host should be. Loyalists interact to reaffirm their self concept that they are loyalists or loyal to the station. Some interact to send commentaries on documentaries, films, songs or artists. Others provide opinions on what they think of the hosts; evaluate hosts, their performance and how that stacks up to how they perceive the station to be or odd to be. Their criterion is often self concept defined and related to the collective efficacy. Critical texts are sent to acknowledge consumers' displeasures or frustration over host's performance or their boredom. It is possibly the venting of a consumer who is experiencing a sub-optimal state of interactivity. For example;

“Surely the bFM ad boys should be writing a TV show ... surely!” [01/09/2004 01:55:05 PM - 14] and

“Camilla, if u want a muso to have any cred, surely u don't intro them with, "they are dressed by ...”" [01/11/2005 08:11:24 AM - 14].

Sometimes, consumers just interact to experience the hedonic and have fun. Some of these texts are nonsensical but the texter finds it humorous and passes time through the act;

“Face it your chuck steak! “ [03/04/2005 08:48:15 AM - 21] or

“(Shoosh)” [03/07/2005 09:05:41 AM - 21].

Some connect with the station to be reporters, to inform a particular incident that is 'happening' out somewhere (it could be social or political). People that text in to inform a traffic update. Others act like the co-host. They send in their suggestions on how the programme should progress or how a host should improve. For example;

"You should give a prize for a caller to do a movie review Damien ... Yes you should!" [01/08/2004 01:46:11 PM - 14].

Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that in this ubiquitous context the consumers' interactive response is defined by 4 properties, that is, the LOOP model that defines the interactivity as: synchronicity, two-way dialogue, contingency, and control. An exploration of these properties indicates that being interactive creates a strong sense of belongingness to a community and social hub. From a relational perspective the interactions between participants is an intense bond, symbolic of the relationship between siblings in a family context and/or 'best friends'. The expression of interactivity is driven by a sense of self congruity and belief in the communities shared aim towards the co-creation of the avant-garde. Interaction is art. They protect and must feel in control, not just in the content but in the way that community is perceived and behaves. Interactivity also revolves around the need for relational nostalgia. The interactive experience is optimized when two-way dialogue is contingent and synchronous for station, consumer and community involved and in control of the content and process of interactivity. Interactivity is also defined by time and space. It contradicts with the ubiquity of the media. Consumers argue for some physical reference point in time and space. Interactivity in the form of txt has been coded into a symbolic language that only the station, consumer and community can understand. Contingency in the conversation is elicited and un-elicited. It arrives to reaffirm self congruity, loyalty, provide criticism, experience the hedonic and alleviate boredom. In all it is driven to modify the form and content and co-create the avant-garde.

Our findings argue that when practitioners develop advertising campaigns designed to be interactive, coupling ubiquitous media like radio and mobile, they should consider the LOOP model and its definition of interactivity. These campaigns should seek to; (1) put the consumer in control of the communication process, (2) encourage two-way dialogue that is based on (3) contingent communications while at the same time consider the effects of time, that is, (4) synchronous communications.

Future research could seek to understand the consumption of interactivity by the consumer. Work could progress to replicate the approach of Davis and Sajtos (2008) to model the interactive response for the 24 consumers over the 3 year period. Combining a qualitative understanding with the response model may help researchers further understand what drives the interactivity between these ubiquitous media. What maybe important to explain are the significant inflexion points in the actual interactive response vs. the consumers actual txt response. Further work is also required on the type responses. For example, the implications of customer abuse of the marketer.

The research has limitations as demographics were not available for this data set. In addition, some of the text messages did not make sense and were difficult to decode. This can be alleviated through a second phase whereby researcher interviews those that texted in, to provide more background on their text messages and their texting behaviour.

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