

They like to watch, yes, but that's just the beginning

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HAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHA WOW LOVE
HIS OUTFIT!! #GLEE

An example of an “outlet tweet,” from a Gleek with strong opinions.

Kai Huotari was a visiting scholar at Berkeley's School of Information in the spring of 2011, when the Fox TV series *Glee*—a weekly musical drama about the fictional McKinley High School glee club—took an unexpectedly interesting turn. While the club's lovable misfits struggled, as usual, to navigate the shoals of sex, social life and show tunes, the Twitter hashtag “#Glee” now floated persistently in the lower-right corner of the screen.

Some viewers, no doubt, had no idea what to make of it. But as Huotari would eventually discover—in the course of analyzing some 4,000 live-tweets, interviewing 45 live-tweeters and producing a 200-page dissertation for Finland's Hanken School of Economics—the network itself may have misread the nature of the social-media phenomenon known as live-tweeting.

“It's not solely about the show,” he explains, speaking via Skype from his

home in Helsinki in advance of a campus lecture sponsored by the I School. "It's also about the conversation that's taking place," which includes not just fans but people who may actually loathe the show.

TV live-tweeting—the act of sending out Twitter messages about a program in real time—is a form of empowerment, Huotari says, a way for consumers to transform an essentially passive experience into a different, more active one. And that process, which he calls "experientializing," isn't exclusive to so-called "Gleeks" and fans of the Pittsburgh Penguins, the other group he examined.

Huotari, a sometime filmmaker with master's degrees in filmmaking and computer science, was scouring the world of viral marketing for a topic for his Ph.D. dissertation when he hit upon the idea of customer communications. YouTube and Facebook were taking off, and he noted a paucity of scholarly research on a subject his intuition told him had wide-ranging implications.

"If you go to a museum, for example, you often go with a friend or family member, and you talk about what you see. And that's actually very important for your experience as a museum-goer," he says. "But how that really affects the customer experience, your museum-going experience, hadn't been studied.

"My take on that was that it must be a big deal," he says. "I mean, you can go to a museum, and maybe not like the pieces that you see, the artwork. But maybe because of the discussions you have with the people you're there with, you've enjoyed the experience as a whole. Because you've learned something, you've been able to express your thoughts, and so on."

Which brings us to Glee and the National Hockey League.

From a research perspective, studying how people communicate in museums or other public venues wasn't an option for Huotari. The spoken word is ephemeral and thus hard to capture. Conversations can be recorded, but doing so surreptitiously is unethical, while transparency is apt to affect the way people talk.

"That's why I was so glad when I arrived in Berkeley in 2010," recalls Huotari, at the time an employee of the Helsinki Institute for Information Technology, which often shares scholars with the Berkeley campus. The live-tweeting phenomenon was growing, and Glee had the largest Twitter following of any show on the air. (The program currently boasts 2.85 million followers.)

"It was exactly what I was looking for. Twitter was perfect, in the sense that tweets are public, and they are recorded," Huotari says. He was able to see users' in- and outbound tweets, collect them and analyze them. And he followed up with dozens of live-tweeters to better grasp the attraction of simultaneously watching TV and corresponding with strangers via missives of no more than 140 characters, including the multiple exclamation points favored by Gleeks and hockey fans alike.

"I wanted to understand what makes people act this way, which was a mystery to me," he says. "As a person who has made films myself, it was incomprehensible that someone would ruin their TV experience by talking to someone, let alone tweet, while they were watching a show."



malkin71_
@malkin71_

@malkin71_ TODAY IS YOUR DAY!!! I know you'll hit the back of the net!!! I believe in you!!! #Pens #NHL #Pittsburgh

↳ Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite *** More

A fan tweets encouragement to Evgeni Malkin, a member of the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team.

He admits to being disturbed by people who munch popcorn in movie theaters, and isn't thrilled when his wife talks to him when they're watching a film. But live-tweeting TV was something else again.

"What pushes people to do this," he wondered, "and what do they get out of it?"

Talking smack, but with friends

What he found was not what he expected, and likely not what program marketers did, either.

Even Twitter, it turns out, got live-tweeting wrong.

Originally, says Huotari, Twitter envisioned live-tweeting as a way for celebrities on awards shows, for example, to take their followers behind the scenes to induce them to tune in and keep watching. But that top-down model was turned on its head by the users themselves.

"What is key is that live-tweeting, especially when it emerged, was really customer-led," he says. "What happened was that regular people, regular spectators, started to live-tweet during the show. It wasn't Twitter who told them to live-tweet. It wasn't the TV networks. This was something that people integrated into their service experience without the knowledge of the providers, in this case the broadcasters or the producers of the shows."

Huotari himself had no idea live-tweeters could be so selective about

how, and with whom, they engage over their favorite—or, in some cases, least favorite—TV broadcasts.

"When I started the study, Time magazine had just published their article about Twitter being the water cooler of the Internet, where everyone came together in this Twitterverse to talk about things," he says. "I had this mindset that everyone would be talking with everyone."

He discovered, in fact, that live-tweeters ventured to hashtags like #Glee mainly to find fellow viewers, and then followed a much smaller group in their own timelines. That is, instead of the conversational anarchy that comes of millions of tweeters endlessly tweeting, they engaged with only a few dozen or so.

"There are people who hate Glee, and people who love Glee," he says. "And they never meet, because they don't follow each other."

Huotari found a similar impulse—a desire to connect with like-minded viewers—among NHL fans.

"Smack talk is very popular in the sports sphere, and many of my respondents said they just love to talk about the opposing team," he says. "But when I asked them, do you go and talk smack using the opposing team's hashtag, they said no. Because that just leads to such antagonistic tweeting that they prefer not to. They like to talk smack with fans of their team—again, with like-minded people."

Huotari eventually identified four types of TV live-tweeters, ranging from the "fanatic" group—people so avid about their favorite show they tweet about it even when it's not being televised—to "active" Twitter users, whose chronic tweeting, while apt to include comments about shows they watch, is more of a parallel activity, akin to cooking with the TV on, than an essential part of the viewing experience.

He also identified four main categories of live-tweets. "Courtesy tweets," for example, are a heads-up to nonfans, signaling that they may want to ignore this particular thread, while "outlet tweets" are a way to express an opinion about the program in question. Viewers can direct the conversation toward particular aspects of a show via "selection tweets," and "analysis tweets" allow a group of like-minded followers to engage in what Huotari terms "joint meaning-making."

What TV live-tweeters have in common, he says, is something they also share with consumers of other services, and this holds a lesson for marketers. When people read on the bus or subway, he says, they, too, are "experientializing"—integrating two activities in a way that creates a new, more customized experience. A transit provider that facilitates the wish to merge reading and riding—via improved lighting, for instance, or Internet access—is apt to gain a competitive advantage.

"Nike has understood this," Huotari says. "They're not just selling sneakers, but the whole experience, where you can listen to music, make a jogging route, create a log of where you've listened to which songs, and so on. It's really about the whole experience, where people often are really the innovators.

"When you get this," he adds, "then you really are serving people in a big way."

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