

Study shows talking about products can lead to better conversations

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The first day at a new school or in a new job can be exhilarating, but the awkward introductions and halting conversations when meeting new people often lead to stress and social anxiety.

Now, new research from the University at Albany and Duke University shows how talking about products you have on display, such as books on a bookshelf, can help aid conversations and relationship development.

In "Product-facilitated conversations: When does starting a conversation by mentioning a product lead to better conversational outcomes?" lead author Hillary J.D. Wiener and co-authors James R. Bettman and Mary Frances Luce examine how products that [consumers](#) publicly display influence how other consumers start conversations with them.

[Published](#) in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, the authors find that the conversations resulting from these interactions are often enjoyable and self-disclosing.

"Over the years, researchers have developed tips to help consumers initiate conversations with others, such as preparing a topic list or using an app to suggest conversation topics," said Wiener, an assistant professor of marketing in UAlbany's School of Business. "We propose a simpler way consumers can start conversations with strangers: mentioning a product the stranger is publicly displaying."

In three studies, the authors examine the conversational consequences of starting a conversation by mentioning a product. The findings show that consumers have better conversations when they mention an item to its owner than when they start conversations in other ways. The authors then explore the characteristics of items that are frequently mentioned and that, when mentioned, lead to good conversations.

"Much research on consumer conversations has focused on downsides of talking about products relative to experiences, but we show consumers can use products to allow them to talk or learn about an experience—a trip, a concert—they would not otherwise likely discuss," continued Wiener.

"In our view, products and experiences need not compete for conversational attention, but products can be conversational wedges to open the door to deeper and more enjoyable conversations about experiences, interests or other topics."

According to the authors, given consumers' struggles to initiate social interactions, it's noteworthy that products can help consumers break down barriers that lead to "undersociality."

The study is a first look at product-facilitated conversations, and many questions remain.

"Future research should consider new ways to manipulate the conversation topic as well as non-weather-related conversation starters," continued Wiener. "In addition, future research should examine exactly how products facilitate enjoyable conversation."

For example, the preliminary research suggests attractive products generate many mentions or compliments, but few extended conversations. Conversely, some products may discourage mention or lead to negative interactions. Participants in the study rarely mentioned luxury products or products that revealed intimate parts of their identities, such as religious beliefs.

"These products are classic identity signals, but given cultural taboos on discussing religion or money, appear to rarely facilitate conversation," said Wiener.

However, some interviewees described a benefit to displaying products with limited appeal: helping them screen prospective friends for compatibility.

"Some interviewees described long-term friendships that began with a

product-facilitated [conversation](#), while others ended up not pursuing relationships if people reacted negatively to books on their bookshelf," said Wiener.

The authors suggest further research should examine how frequently and when this occurs. The authors also suggest that there are interesting questions at the intersection of product-facilitated conversations and stigma.

"Consumers with stigmatized conditions, such as [physical disabilities](#), report others often ignore them or inappropriately mention their condition," said Wiener.

"Might stigmatized consumers sometimes display [products](#) to encourage product-facilitated conversations and direct observers away from undesirable topics? These are just some of the potential questions that we expect to analyze in future studies."

More information: Hillary J. D. Wiener et al, Product-facilitated conversations: When does starting a conversation by mentioning a product lead to better conversational outcomes?, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1387](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1387)

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