On Monday, I spoke on a SXSW Interactive panel, “Embracing Analog: Why Physical Is Hot,” along with Frank Rose, author of *The Art of Immersion* and correspondent for *Wired*, and marketing authority Paul Woolmington, co-founder of communications management consultancy Naked Communications Americas. The panel spotlighted our findings from a survey, designed in partnership with Rose, that explored the rising embrace of analog among consumers in the U.S. and the U.K. (Find the results in our new trend report on this topic.) As a complement to the panel and our report, we asked Rose and Woolmington for their insights into what’s driving this phenomenon, why it’s especially prevalent among Millennials and what it means for marketers.

*To start, can you speak to why people are embracing analog as we spend ever more time in the digital world?*

FR: Value is a function of scarcity—that’s why diamonds are expensive and glass is not—so the more time we spend looking at screens, the more rare and exotic the real world begins to seem. Plus, I think we’re seeing the evolution of engagement away from being primarily digital. Digital media allow for—and in many cases demand—active participation, so they provoke an entirely different sort of engagement from movies and TV. But now it’s beginning to seem that the future of immersive entertainment will be driven by a blending of old and new, of physical and digital. It’s almost as if the expectations of active engagement we bring to digital are spilling over into our experience of the real world.

But maybe I’m over-intellectualizing. The simple fact is, we’re physical creatures. We’re hardwired to respond to cues in the physical environment. That’s not going to change—unless Ray Kurzweil is right and we all get swept up into the singularity and trade our brains for silicon. Which could happen, but I sort of doubt it.

PW: We’re also emotional creatures. But as life becomes more hyper-connected and convenient, our worlds are being tilted toward the rational IQ sides of our brains. This leaves an increasing gap in the emotional EQ side, which leads us to yearn for and seek out analog objects and physical experiences.

We are at an important inflection point in our old/new digital society. The speed of change just keeps accelerating, and we haven’t yet fully understood the anxiety that results. We’ve gone from a digitally connected (old) world to a hyper-connected (new) world in a short few years and haven’t had time to fully adapt. We’ve been too busy learning and embracing the new to fully realize the repercussions. The opportunity at this inflection is to understand how citizens and society can not just do things more cheaply, easily and quickly but also emotionally connect in more meaningful and immersive ways across the digital-analog divide. Our survey found that people cite rational reasons—ease, speed, convenience and cost—for why they prefer to buy music, read news and do other things online. But they cite emotional reasons—better experience and comfort—when asked why they do things in the physical world. Can you explain this dichotomy?
FR: I think it has to do with our hardwiring. There’s no question that digital is more convenient—the amount of information I have at my fingertips today compared to 20 years ago is staggering. But emotion and efficiency are not the same thing at all.

PW: I agree. Digital doesn’t address our emotional needs. Digital meets our more rational needs—it’s faster and easier and lets us keep more control—but as human beings we need our emotional beings satisfied, and obviously that need isn’t being met by our digital experiences. Therefore, in order to balance that, we’re seeking the analog more than ever. We’re looking for more meaningful emotional experiences and connections. We’re seeking to rebalance our IQ and EQ states.

Abraham Maslow’s work on the hierarchy of needs, which parallels many other theories of developmental psychology, illustrates this dichotomy well. The four fundamental states, which Maslow called “deficiency needs,” are esteem, friendship and love, security and physical needs. If these needs aren’t met, then as humans we will feel anxious and tense. The human mind is complex and handles parallel processes at the same time, so the need to balance the rational with the emotional is at the heart of this. It explains why an “emotional void” in the digital world makes humans, even the most digitally hardcore, seek out analog experiences.

Can you speak to the role nostalgia plays?

PW: It’s fascinating that Millennials are the most nostalgic of all the groups researched, and perhaps counterintuitive. The research showed that 62 percent read e-books digitally but 78 percent yearn for the smell and feel of paper books. We’re hardwired for physical and emotional connection and meaning, so the more we are removed from them, the more we wish for them.

Nostalgia is a consequence of the loss of emotional connections and the anxiety that produces. In our new digitally driven world, which is moving at an ever faster pace, nostalgia takes on a deeper context: the sentimental yearning for things past that felt safe and secure and represent happier, less complex times.

FR: Nostalgia is always a powerful force, but in this case I think it has to do with the feeling that we’re standing at a threshold, about to enter some new form of existence. Just think about the words we use. For all that we spent decades watching ever more TV, nobody ever talked about TV being somehow different from “the real world.” But as we spend more and more of our time in virtual environments—which are still evolving and increasingly immersive—it’s only natural to want to have something to grab onto. And if you’re going to grab onto something, it had better be tangible.

We found that 59 percent of our respondents agreed that imperfections like scratches and scuffs give objects personality, especially Millennials (67 percent) and Gen Xers (60 percent). Why is this?

PW: Clearly, imperfections are an antidote to the sanitized, efficient and functional world of digital and technological perfection. The more we conform around digital products and services, the more likely we are to want to assert our individuality and character. That leads us to seek the authentic raw state.

The digital world strives for perfection. Look no further than Apple and its brethren. Imagine an Apple fragrance: It would be the scent of technology mixed with sleek aluminum, perfectly formed glass, light wood surfaces and no imperfections or patina.
In such a world, humans will increasingly crave authentic and nostalgic references and experiences as a counterbalance.

The greatest science fiction writers depict futuristic worlds that are enhanced by technology but have dystopian, anxious, emotionally void societies. These fictional worlds are inhabited by people yearning to fill their emotional voids with nostalgia and analog physical experiences. Prescient?

FR: Well, authenticity has been an issue for some time now. Holden Caulfield was railing against phonies back in the ’50s. Again, it’s a case of something being more and more valued as it grows scarce. Only now the whole question has gone into overdrive. I realized we had entered another stage when I was reading a book called *Authenticity* a few years back. It was fascinating from a marketing perspective, but when I got to the part where the authors drew a distinction between “real fake” and “fake real,” I figured it was all over.

Digital complicates things because it enables you to make an endless number of perfect copies. It used to be that even fake stuff could acquire a patina over time. But bits don’t degrade; only atoms do. So nothing acquires a patina unless it’s been rendered a physical form. Never mind what’s fake and what’s real: How can you even tell what’s old and what’s new? Again, it’s a case of needing to be grounded in some physical reality.

One of our most interesting findings is that the more one tends to do online, the greater one’s affinity for the physical and tactile, especially among Millennials and early adopters. Why is this?

FR: It is interesting, but when you think about it, it really makes sense. Millennials are more attuned to things digital than any other adults. And as alluring as the digital world may be, we’re all beginning to realize its limits. Millennials are in a better position to do so than anyone. If you’re looking at digital from the outside, as way too many older people still are, all you see is that everything looks wrong—but it only looks wrong because you’re looking at it through the lens of the past. When you’ve embraced it on its own terms, you’re in a position to criticize it much more intelligently.

Any interesting examples you’ve seen of people embracing analog?

PW: There are so many: old-school craft skills, hobbies, homemade goods, Etsy, home cooking, the farm-to-table trend, cooperatives, meet-ups. Airbnb, Uber, Warby Parker and Mealku are great examples of disruptive business models with digital-analog integration and both rational and emotional appeal.

FR: It’s pretty much everywhere: Etsy, the maker movement, the rise of artisanal everything—atoms are on the march.

How can marketers leverage this trend?

PW: Avoid the “emotional void” in your digital communications, marketing, products and services. To better serve consumers and create more powerful immersive relationships, marketers need to address the relationship between the rational and emotional states (IQ and EQ) across digital and analog platforms, channels and experiences.
The opportunity for marketers is to understand how citizens and society can not just do things more cheaply, easily and quickly but also connect emotionally in deeper ways across the digital-analog divide.

FR: The important thing is this: People are no more going to abandon digital than they’re going to abandon electricity. But even though we all have electricity, we still like to dine by candlelight. No one reads by candlelight anymore, because it’s too inefficient. But dining by candlelight is romantic, it sets a nice mood. So candles may be obsolete, but that doesn’t mean they’re going away. If you keep in mind that digital is for efficiency and convenience, and physical is for feelings of substance and emotional connectedness—for feelings generally—you can’t go too far wrong.

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