Track 1: Marketplace Responses to Social Isolation: Advancing Consumer Well-Being

Meryl P. Gardner, University of Delaware (point of contact), gardnerm@udel.edu
Ainslie E. Schultz, Providence College

Abstract

Social isolation has become a defining societal challenge of the twenty-first century, yet we know relatively little about its role in consumer behavior. This track invites participants to help shape an emerging area of consumer research by examining how marketplace, institutional, and societal forces can create, reinforce, or alleviate social isolation. Together, we will distinguish social isolation from related concepts such as loneliness, develop a conceptual framework, and identify novel and promising directions for future research. Ultimately, the track seeks to reimagine how marketing and markets can foster meaningful social connection, improve consumer well-being, and promote human flourishing.

Extended Abstract

Social isolation has emerged as one of the defining societal challenges of the twenty-first century. Across much of the world, the social structures that foster connection have transformed. Families are smaller and more geographically dispersed, marriage and birth rates have declined, participation in religious and civic organizations has fallen, and increasing residential mobility has weakened community ties (Klinenberg 2018). Together, these structural changes have reshaped consumers' social environments, prompting governments, including the United States, Japan, and the European Union, to identify social isolation as a public health emergency (U.S. Surgeon General 2023; Baarck 2021).

Despite its growing significance, social isolation has received little attention within consumer research. Existing work has offered important insights into related constructs, including loneliness, belonging, social exclusion, and ostracism, demonstrating how these experiences influence consumer judgment, decision making, and well-being (De Freitas et al. 2026; Mead et al. 2011; Pieters 2013; Schultz et al. 2022). However, social isolation is conceptually distinct. Whereas loneliness reflects the subjective perception that one's social needs are unmet (Cacioppo et al. 2006), social isolation refers to the objective structure of consumers' social worlds, including the availability of relationships, opportunities for community participation, and access to supportive social networks (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015). Public health research increasingly shows that these constructs have different antecedents and consequences (Hong et al 2023), yet consumer research has largely treated them interchangeably. As a result, questions remain about the role of marketplace forces in creating, reinforcing, and alleviating social isolation.

The purpose of this Track 1 proposal is to establish social isolation as a distinct construct in consumer research and to develop an integrative conceptual framework to understand its role in the marketplace. Rather than focusing solely on how consumers respond to social disconnection, this framework shifts attention toward understanding how markets shape opportunities for meaningful social connection, and how marketing infrastructure can be developed to combat social isolation. Specifically, the proposed collaboration will (1) define and distinguish social isolation from related constructs, including loneliness, belonging, social exclusion, and ostracism; (2) identify the marketplace, institutional, and societal forces that contribute to or reduce social isolation; (3) develop a conceptual framework linking social isolation to key consumer outcomes and marketplace processes; (4) articulate promising theoretical questions; (5) provide a future research agenda that identifies empirical opportunities; (6.) describe the parameters of

marketing infrastructure that would enhance social connection; and (7.) suggest how consumers, public policy makers, academics, and practitioners can each contribute toward implementing a connection-supporting infrastructure.

Desired outcomes from this conference include the development of a high-quality conceptual article for publication in a leading consumer research journal. By bringing together scholars at different career stages, practitioners/ policymakers, a co-chair who has not yet participated in TCR and one whose previous TCR participation has led to published articles, this collaboration seeks to establish a common conceptual language, stimulate future empirical research among the participants and other scholars, and generate insights that inform managerial practice and policy aimed at promoting consumer well-being and human flourishing. See Appendix A for timeline.

Who Should Apply?

Anyone interested in social isolation, loneliness, social connection, consumer well-being, health, or the role of markets in shaping social relationships will find this track valuable. We seek a variety of applicants, including academics from different disciplines (e.g., marketing, psychology, public policy, sociology, and public health) and relevant external stakeholders (e.g., industry professionals, policymakers, and nonprofit organizations). We welcome applications from scholars at all career stages and particularly encourage doctoral students in the final stages of their Ph.D. programs and junior faculty within the first three years post-Ph.D. We plan to include at least one junior scholar in the track.

Appendix A: Timeline

Before Conference	
Nov. 15, 2026	Deadline for participant applications.
Dec. 31, 2026	Track co-chairs submit participant application reviews to conference chairs.
Jan. 15, 2027	Applicants notified of decisions.
Jan. 25, 2007	Welcome email sent to participants. Participants receive a curated reading list covering social isolation, loneliness, the Capability Approach, service ecosystems, and marketplace systems to establish a common theoretical foundation.
Feb. 12, 2027	Introductory Zoom meeting. Participants introduce their research and/or practical experience related to the topic, discuss key themes from the readings, and identify shared interests and complementary expertise. Create a WhatsApp group to encourage informal communication.
Feb. – May 2027	Participants engage in monthly Zoom meetings and collaborate through a shared cloud workspace and WhatsApp. Meetings focus on synthesizing the literature, evaluating theoretical perspectives, identifying research gaps, and discussing emerging conceptual ideas. The objective is to develop a shared understanding of the literature and begin outlining the conceptual framework/ model before the conference.

During Conference	
June 1, 2027	Participants arrival.
June 2, 2027	Develop and refine an integrated conceptual framework addressing social isolation in consumer research.
June 3, 2027	Finalize the conceptual framework, identify key propositions, and develop a detailed outline for the conceptual article.
June 4, 2027	Establish a post-conference collaboration plan, including authorship responsibilities and writing timeline.
Post Conference	
June 2027	Research and write subsections. Cut and paste subsections into a rough version of a manuscript reflecting the outline's structure. Set up weekly or biweekly Zoom meetings for discussions.
July 1, 2027	As many track members as possible attend JACR Special Issue webinar and Q&A.
July 2027	Revise subsections based on group feedback and integrate them into a more coherent draft. Identify what needs to be added, changed, reconceptualized, etc.
Aug. 2027	Continue to revise sections based on group feedback and to improve integration. Focus on improving conceptualization, sharpening propositions, and ensuring the paper offers a clear and compelling contribution to consumer research and consumer well-being.
Early Sept. 2027	Send manuscript to several experts who are not in the group and integrate their feedback.
Late Sept. 2027	Send penultimate draft to group to polish the manuscript and prepare it for submission.
Oct 1, 2027	Submit the conceptual article for publication to special issue of JACR or another top outlet. Continue collaboration on related empirical research projects emerging from the framework developed through the working group.

References

Baarck, Julia, Alexandra Balahur, Laura Cassio, Béatrice d'Hombres, Zsuzsanna Pásztor, and Guido Tintori (2021), *Loneliness in the EU: Insights from Surveys and Online Media Data*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Cacioppo, John T., Louise C. Hawkley, John M. Ernst, Mary Burleson, Gary G. Berntson, Bita Nouriani, and David Spiegel (2006), "Loneliness within a Nomological Net: An Evolutionary Perspective," *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40 (6), 1054–1085.

De Freitas, Julian, Zeliha Oğuz-Uğuralp, Ahmet Kaan Uğuralp, and Stefano Puntoni (2026), "AI Companions Reduce Loneliness," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 52 (6), 1126–1148.

Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Baker, Tyler Harris, and David Stephenson (2015), "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10 (2), 227–237.

Hong, Joanna H., Julia S. Nakamura, Lisa F. Berkman, Frances S. Chen, Koichiro Shiba, Ying Chen, Eric S. Kim, and Tyler J. VanderWeele (2023), "Are Loneliness and Social Isolation Equal Threats to Health and Well-Being? An Outcome-Wide Longitudinal Approach," *SSM – Population Health*, 23, 101459.

Klinenberg, Eric (2018), *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. New York: Crown.

Mead, Nicole L., Roy F. Baumeister, Tyler F. Stillman, Catherine D. Rawn, and Kathleen D. Vohs (2011), "Social Exclusion Causes People to Spend and Consume Strategically in the Service of Affiliation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37 (5), 902–919.

Pieters, Rik (2013), "Bidirectional Dynamics of Materialism and Loneliness: Not Just a Vicious Cycle," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40 (4), 615–631.

Schultz, A. E., Newman, K. P., & Wright, S. A. (2023). The negative effect of low belonging on consumer responses to sustainable products. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *187*(3), 473-492.

U.S. Surgeon General (2023), *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used to assist with edits for grammar, clarity, and wording.

Biographies

Ainslie E. Schultz received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona and is an Associate Professor of Marketing in the Arthur F. and Patricia Ryan Center for Business Studies at Providence College. Her research examines how psychological and social factors shape consumer decision-making, with the goal of advancing consumer well-being and helping organizations better understand and respond to consumer needs. Her work has been published in various outlets, including the *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Psychology and Marketing,* and *Journal of Business Research*. She currently serves on the Editorial Review Board of the *Journal of Business Research*.

Meryl P. Gardner is Professor of Marketing at University of Delaware's Lerner College. She is a six-time TCR participant and a 2017 TCR Track 1 co-chair who earned her B.A. from Johns Hopkins University and her M.S. and Ph.D. from Carnegie Mellon University. Her research investigates how consumers make choices and undertake consequential behaviors, especially those related to individual and collective well-being. Her work has appeared in *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research, PNAS, Journal of Consumer Affairs, Energy Economics, Resource & Energy Economics, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing,* and other leading journals.