# EMERGE SMARTER
eBOOK INSIGHTS

SOCIAL LISTENING AS A COMPLEMENT TO TRADITIONAL QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGIES

Millions of voices are talking about the brands they buy and consume every day, and as researchers it is tempting to want to capture and quantify that information. Social listening often works in concert with the other tools in our toolbox by providing an authentic lens for understanding the consumer mindset.

Alex Palermo
Senior Research Director,
Qualitative Research Services

C+R
RESEARCH
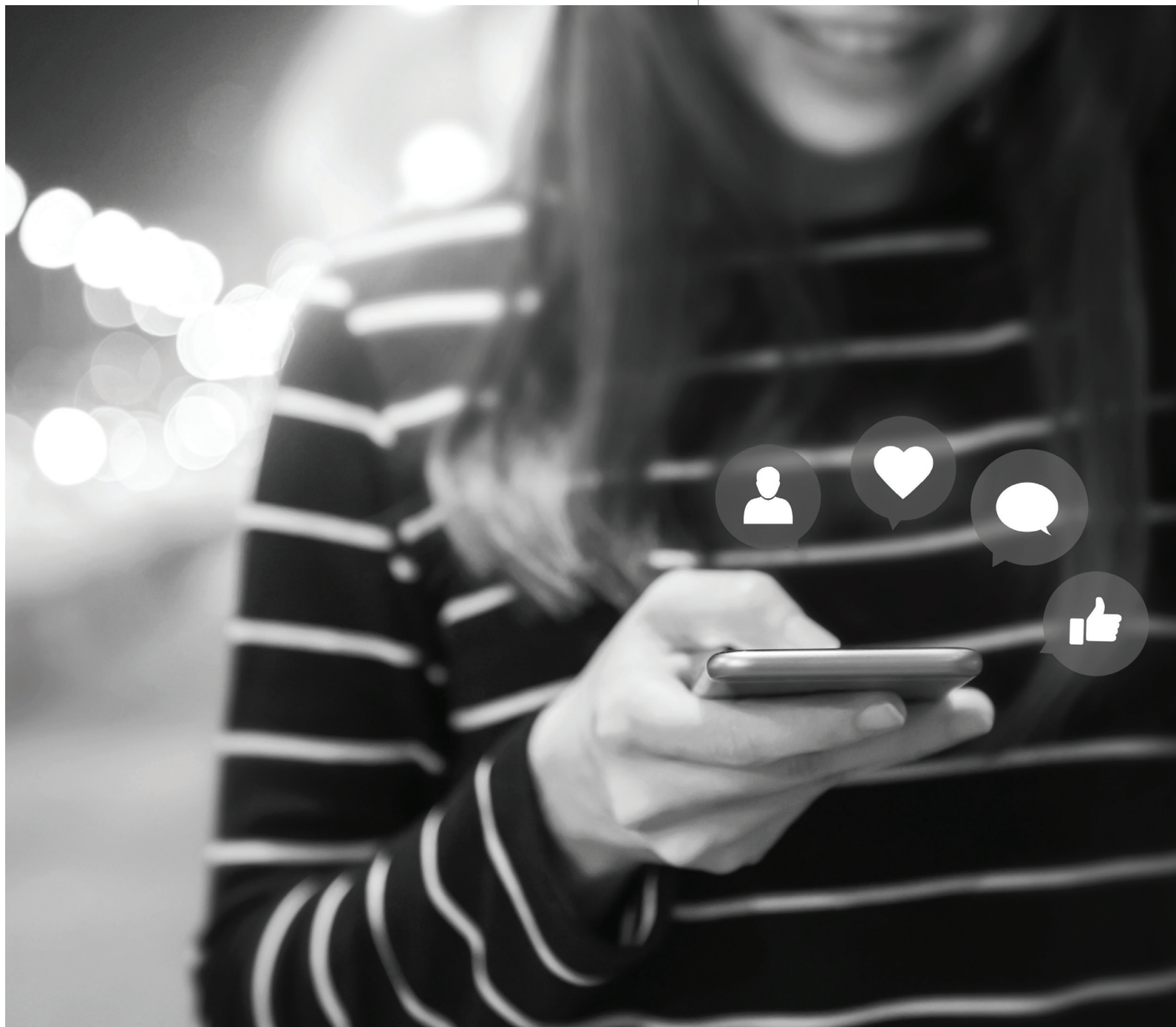
#SocialOverload

These days, it feels like we hear about social media everywhere. It's hard to miss all of the news related to Facebook, SnapChat, and Twitter—even if we are not engaging in social media in our personal lives.

#AllTheRage

As market researchers, this is no different. You've probably heard of social listening or social media monitoring. Maybe your company even does it.

#TweetUs

Contrary to popular belief, it's not just for big CPG brands or companies with big marketing budgets. In fact, social listening is actually an agile method that, when used correctly, can be both cost-effective and informative. But before we get too carried away, what is social listening anyway?

#WhatIsSocialListening

Social listening is the process of monitoring social media and the rest of the web for mentions of your brand so you can understand what people think, feel, and say about your brand online.

#ListenLouder

Listening is one of the most important things a brand can do online. More than ever, millions of consumers are talking about your products and brands online. Not only is this information abundant, it's also timely and completely organic. So, if we as market researchers could capture and quantify this information, why wouldn't we?

#Noise

But hold that thought. Just because we *can* capture and quantify it, doesn't mean we always *should*. Imagine if there were a million consumers standing in the middle of Times Square shouting your brand's name at the top of their lungs, along with some other message or non-sequitur which they had attached to your brand. Maybe it was a product review, a pat on the back, or just a simple shout out. Well, that's pretty much what social listening data looks like at its core. Can you imagine trying to make sense of all of those competing voices without first starting out with a research objective or a question to answer? Neither can we.

#OneSizeDoesNotFitAll

That brings us to our next point—what social listening ISN'T. Social listening is not a one-size-fits-all approach for gathering consumer insights. If it were, any brand that could leverage their social media following would be capitalizing off of it. In many cases, conventional qualitative and quantitative research are still needed to gather the insights you and your teams need. These can be situations where products or brands are new to market, the research questions are more exploratory, or if more precision is needed to validate specific research questions or hypotheses. On the flip side, there are also many situations where social listening makes a great complement to traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches.

#WhenItFits

You might be wondering when social listening makes a good fit for your research programs. Following are four potential use cases for social listening as a complement to traditional qualitative or quantitative market research approaches.

Audience Analysis. The first potential use case for social listening is an audience analysis. Audience analysis gives you that quick-hitting, statistically accurate read on who is talking about your brand so you might be able to pivot and target new markets that were previously untapped by your marketing team. My favorite example of audience analysis comes from the CPG industry—pickles, actually! Back in 2014, social listening was done to capture information about who was talking about pickles online. Surprisingly, a lot of the buzz was coming from the athletic community. Fitness enthusiasts were using online message boards to provide tips on recovery methods for warding off muscle cramping. One of those life hacks happened to be pickle juice! Audience analysis for pickles ended up leading to innovations in the sports and fitness industry, including pickle pops and pickle juice shots to treat and prevent muscle cramps.

Brand Monitoring. Another great use case for social listening is brand monitoring. Think of this as another input into your KPI trackers. At C+R Research, we have conducted social listening studies in both retail and health insurance that incorporated comparisons over time and integrated them into a quantitative tracker. These 'snapshots' can be taken by pulling all mentions of the brand at the same time as the quantitative field period, and then analyzing content to see what is causing an uptick or downturn in number of mentions.

Because social data is qualitative data at its core, it's as if you've included an endless array of open-ended questions in your tracking survey, each with several hundred thousand responses at times. Amazing! We are then able to quantify those comments to tell you where, when, and why the buzz is happening about your brand. For example, when we did this in the retail category, we learned that brand campaigns that involve in-store activities for the whole family (such as in-store scavenger hunts) lead to positive mentions about the brand online and can engender loyalty to the store. This level of detail is something that we may have missed in a traditional quantitative tracker.

Competitive Intelligence. Another effective way to use social listening is for competitive intelligence. Traditionally, qualitative or quantitative insights can take time because you need to recruit the right people and then analyze their responses for any significant deltas. In the absence of time, social listening provides a very quick snapshot of how your brand is being talked about in relation to competitors.

While you may not be able to test a specific hypothesis or research question if it doesn't come up organically, social listening can provide insight into why your brand is not as favored in the marketplace or what your competitors are doing that you are not. Case in point: a retail brand once wanted to know why its sales were suffering but other stores at a similar price point were doing just fine. Social listening taught us that it wasn't the product, but the customer service that was causing the dip in sales. Customers of this brand were more likely to report a poor customer service experience when reviewing the store online compared to competitive counterparts. Something that may have taken weeks to find through traditional methods in this case was uncovered very quickly, and the retail brand was able to respond rapidly.

Campaign or Event Analysis. Our fourth example of a powerful social listening use case is a campaign or event analysis. This is when you are looking for a before-and-after snapshot to see if a specific campaign element or marketing event has moved the needle on perceptions of your brand. Similar to brand monitoring, campaign or event analysis can provide insight into why there are spikes or dips in mentions.

We have also employed social listening for event analysis that was even bigger than just a brand campaign— something that impacted the market overall. Remember the rollout of the Affordable Care Act? At C+R Research, we used social data as one input into a larger study to uncover how consumers were talking about health insurance before and after the rollout of the ACA. It was eye-opening for our client to see the struggles consumers were having when trying to log on to the health insurance marketplace. This social data helped them pivot and respond to issues by providing easier-to-use tools for online purchases.
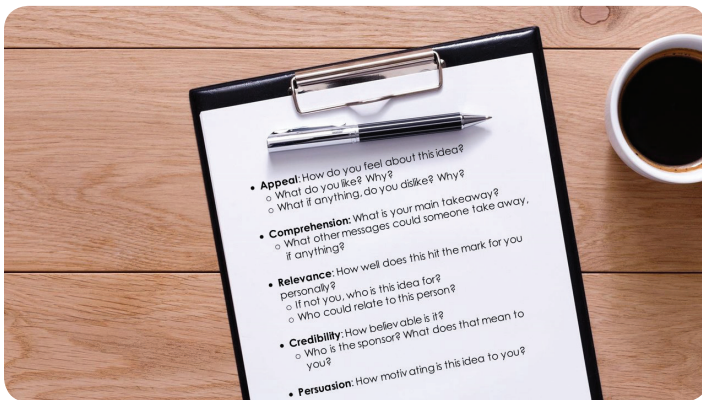
#AThirdPerspective

You might be thinking, "these are the types of projects my colleagues and I have been doing for decades without any help from social media." And you're right! But let's take a look at a hypothetical example together to really illustrate how social listening can provide a valuable third perspective. Let's use the topic we just talked about—the campaign or event analysis. Let's pretend for this example that your company is a retail brand. Imagine your campaign involves an in-store appearance from your favorite celebrity who also happens to be the face of your brand. He or she will be making several in-store appearances nationally, complete with a step-and-repeat that will be fantastic for photo opportunities with your customers.

#TheFirstPerspective

Let's turn back the clock on this campaign. Before moving forward with your celebrity sponsor, you probably did some focus groups or another qualitative research approach to assess the impact that this campaign would have on your brand. You may have invited groups of customers and prospects to share their views on who the celebrity sponsor should be, or reactions to your early-stage creative.

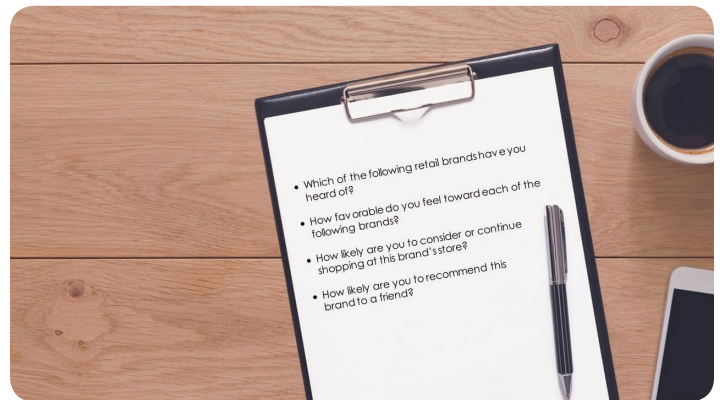Your discussion guide probably looked something like this.

And your results probably looked something like this.

#TheSecondPerspective

Then, maybe you planned a pre-post quantitative read to measure KPIs like awareness, favorability, and likelihood to recommend your retail brand before and after the campaign.


Good news! Your campaign was a success! Awareness and favorability increased, as did future intent (which you probably had a hunch they would based on those focus groups). But your research still feels incomplete. Did you capture the full story? What could be missing?

#TheThirdPerspectiveRecap

The first perspective was the qual, which gave you deep insight into how consumers would react to your brand's campaign, and gave your creative teams direction on how to move forward. You also did a preliminary quant read.

Then, the second perspective was the quant tracker, which told you that you had moved the needle compared to the baseline read on perceptions of your brand post-campaign. But what happened DURING the campaign? This is where social listening can provide a valuable third perspective, and it can do so instantaneously. The agility of social listening allows us to capture large volumes of qualitative data and quantify them through the power of text analytics.

- **Before**: Qualitative & Quantitative Pre-read
- **During**: Social Listening
- **After**: Quantitative Post-read
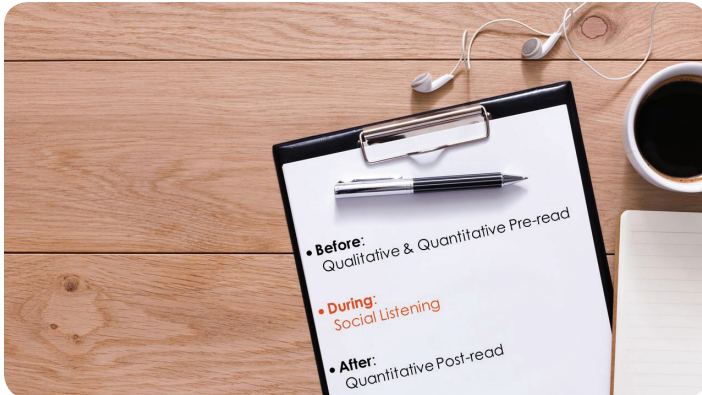
Step 1: Aggregate Content. Let's take a quick peek under the hood of C+R Research's social listening methodology. When we conduct social listening, it is a three-step process. First, we decide on a set of search terms with your team. These might include anything related to your brand or campaign. We then curate them into Boolean search strings, which are customized for your particular research objectives. The Boolean search string curation is an iterative process, where we fine-tune the search terms based on the output we receive to eliminate noise. For instance, when we were doing this for one of our favorite food brands (and this happened to be during the winter Olympics), we found we were getting search results for athletes with the same last name as the food brand! We solved for that immediately.

Step 2: Analyze Content. After we aggregate content, the next step is to code the text using our in-house text analytics software. This is not unlike how we code raw verbatims from the open-ends in our quantitative surveys. The only difference is that there are a TON more words to code in social listening studies than in a typical quant survey. This can take us up to a week to do, but in the end we have anywhere from several dozen to several hundred codes that all ladder up to larger themes or meta-categories that can then be quantified and compared by different sub-groups in the reporting. The other great thing about doing the coding ourselves is that we have control over how to code the positive and negative brand mentions, rather than allowing the platform's sentiment analysis to do it for us. As you may know, the use of some idioms like "sick" and "ill" can mean different things to different people – and these are not always negative descriptors! Once again, C+R is committed to data quality at every phase.

Step 3: Formulate Results. Finally, your C+R team works together to incorporate the results into one cohesive story from all phases of research. Say you had a quantitative tracker that had a social listening add-on. Our quantitative team and social listening team would work together to develop a story that was supported by all of the different inputs, so you don't have to spend your time connecting the dots.

So far, we've been singing the praises of social listening. It is quick, inexpensive, and effective. It also provides a natural consumer voice, and can uncover answers to research questions that we as researchers didn't even know to ask. Sometimes social listening alone cannot provide all of the answers. It is, most often, best used as a supplement to traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches.

#WhichWayDoIGo

So you've probably gathered by now that it's not just about finding one right methodology for your projects. You have three basic options. Option #1 gives you a qualitative read. Option #2 gives you a quant read. Option #3 gives you that hybrid qual and quant read from social listening.

Sometimes it takes just one of these, two of these or even all three of these to answer your research questions. But you might still be wondering when to include that third perspective from social listening. That's why we're here! You can rest assured that when you reach out to us with a request for a prescriptive methodology, we might provide several alternative options as well as add-ons like social listening to help achieve your research goals from a variety of angles. In other words, you don't have to tell us when it's valuable…we'll tell you!

Alex Palermo
Senior Research Director,
Qualitative Research Services

Alex is a skilled qualitative moderator and quantitative analyst who is able to lead all phases of any project.

Alex has over 10 years of experience leading quantitative and qualitative market research studies. In this time, she has led customer satisfaction tracking studies for Fortune 500 companies in the manufacturing industry and has moderated hundreds of in-depth interviews with C-level executives and business decision-makers.

While at C+R, Alex has moderated telephone interviews, webcam interviews, in-person interviews, and mini-groups with business decision-makers. She has also conducted quantitative research studies with business respondents for clients in healthcare and financial services, among other industries.

Alex also has extensive experience conducting social listening studies for clients in the CPG, healthcare, and retail industries.

Prior to joining C+R in 2013, Alex was an Associate Group Director for Beall Research in Chicago and a Senior Project Manager for National Analysts in Philadelphia. Alex received her BA in Communication from Loyola University Maryland, with a minor in Marketing.

Want to know more?

Visit **crresearch.com** to check out the webinar on this subject and more information on our qualitative offerings.

C + R
RESEARCH

Contact us at:
crresearch.com
info@crresearch.com
312.828.9200