

# THE ROLE OF DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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## **THE ROLE OF DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article reviews recently published research about consumers in digital and social media marketing settings. Five themes are identified: (i) consumer digital culture, (ii) responses to digital advertising, (iii) effects of digital environments on consumer behavior, (iv) mobile environments, and (v) online word of mouth (WOM). Collectively these articles shed light from many different angles on how consumers experience, influence, and are influenced by the digital environments in which they are situated as part of their daily lives. Much is still to be understood, and existing knowledge tends to be disproportionately focused on WOM, which is only part of the digital consumer experience. Several directions for future research are advanced to encourage researchers to consider a broader range of phenomena.

## INTRODUCTION

Using the internet, social media, mobile apps, and other digital communication technologies has become part of billions of people's daily lives. For instance, the current rate of internet use among American adults is about 87% and is closer to 100% for demographic groups such as college-educated and higher-income adults [1]. Younger people—the next generation of mass consumers—have similarly high levels [2]. People also spend increasing time online. For example, in the UK, over the last decade the number of hours spent online by adults has more than doubled, and now averages 20.5 hours per week [3]. Social media has fueled part of this growth: worldwide there are now more than 2 billion people using social media [4], and Facebook alone now has approximately 1 billion active users per day [5].

Clearly, people are exposing themselves to more and more digital and social media. This is for many purposes, including in their roles as consumers as they search for information about products,<sup>1</sup> purchase and consume them, and communicate with others about their experiences. Marketers have responded to this fundamental shift by increasing their use of digital marketing channels. In fact, by 2017 approximately one-third of global advertising spending is forecast to be in digital channels [6]. Thus, future consumer marketing will largely be carried out in digital settings, particularly social media and mobile. It is therefore necessary for consumer research to examine and understand consumer behavior in digital environments. This has been happening over the last decade, with increasing amounts of research focusing on digital consumer behavior issues. The literature is still relatively nascent, however, and more research is of course needed—particularly given the ever-changing nature of the digital/social media/mobile environments in which consumers are situated and interact with brands and each other. This article attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> For convenience, I use the term “product” throughout this article to refer to any kind of marketed offer from a firm. This can include specific products or services, as well as brands (multiple products or services) as a whole.

take stock of very recent developments on these issues in the consumer behavior/psychology literature, and in doing so hopes to spur new, relevant research.

This review is based on articles published in between January 2013 and September 2015 in the four leading consumer research journals: *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR), *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (JCP), *Journal of Marketing* (JM), and *Journal of Marketing Research* (JMR). Articles related to digital marketing, social media, and online word of mouth are featured in this review. In total, 29 articles were published on these topics in the consumer behavior literature in the last few years, suggesting that this is an increasingly popular domain within consumer research. In addition to these articles, there were three review articles worth mentioning: (i) Berger's review of word-of-mouth and interpersonal communication research [7], (ii) You et al.'s meta-analysis of online word-of-mouth effects [8], and (iii) Yadav and Pavlou's review of marketing in computer-mediated environments [9].

## **RESEARCH THEMES AND FINDINGS**

Five distinct research themes emerge in recent consumer research on digital marketing and social media. The five themes are (i) consumer digital culture, (ii) advertising, (iii) impacts of digital environments, (iv) mobile, and (v) online WOM and reviews. The most popular themes are online WOM, which is covered by almost half of the articles, and advertising, represented by slightly over one-quarter of the articles. I now discuss each theme.

### **Consumer Digital Culture**

Consumer digital culture research considers, quite deeply, the digital environments in which consumers are situated. A key aspect of this work has been understanding how

consumers' identities and self-concepts extend into digital worlds, such as work by Belk [10, 11]. Belk [10] extended his prior work on the "extended self" to incorporate the digital environments in which consumers now situate themselves, which is an important piece of theory development because it considers concepts such as the ability for consumers to have multiple selves due to possessing multiple online "personas." Belk also suggests many areas for future research. Other research under this theme looked at more specific phenomena. McQuarrie et al. [12] focused on fashion blogging as a means of documenting the "megaphone effect," which is the ability for regular consumers to access large audiences through digital/social media. This is an important effect and they discussed how bloggers go about building audiences and accumulating social (or cultural) capital through demonstrations of "good taste." In a social media setting this essentially means that a blogger (or "influencer") makes recommendations that signal her expertise to others. This is in a specific setting, but has implications for understanding consumers' content-generation behaviors on social media more generally, since signaling positive personal attributes is likely a common motivation for posting certain things on sites like Facebook. Together, these articles make an important conceptual contribution around how we see consumers in a digital world, particularly by implying an expanded conception of what it is to be a consumer in today's digital world.

## **Advertising**

Digital advertising is a major topic in the marketing literature and, with respect to consumer behavior, considers how consumers respond to various aspects of digital ads. A number of recent articles considered behavioral aspects of digital advertising from various perspectives. One interesting perspective taken in a few articles [13-15] was based around how

to overcome (assumed) psychological reactance due to personalization of digital ad targeting. Schumann et al. [13] considered how negative reactions to personalization could be overcome with normative reciprocity appeals (instead of utility appeals). Lambrecht and Tucker [14] studied ad retargeting, which is when personalized recommendations based on prior web-browsing history are made when a consumer returns to a website. Negative responses to retargeting are found, but this is mitigated when consumers' preferences have become more precise. Tucker [15] found that personalized website ads are more favorably received when consumers have a higher perception of being in control of the personal/private information used for personalization, which directly corresponds to literature on psychological reactance and suggests a theoretical way forward for research into consumer digital privacy, which is lacking.

Other articles have considered a variety of digital ad response aspects [16-20]. Luo et al. [16] looked at drivers of popularity for group-buying ads (i.e., Groupon-like "daily deals"), finding social influence (e.g., social proof due to others buying a deal) to be a major driver of deal popularity. Jerath et al. [17] studied responses to search engine advertising, finding that when consumers search for less-popular keywords their searches are more effortful. Puccinelli et al. [18] examined digital video ads (e.g., that run on sites like Hulu and YouTube), focusing on how TV show emotion interacted with ads' energy levels to affect consumers' responses. They find that affective matching between show and ad matters such that when consumers experience "deactivating" emotions (e.g., sadness) it is harder to view energetic ads. Dinner et al. [19] considered how digital display and search ads drive online and offline purchasing for a retailer, finding that digital ads are more effective than offline ads in driving online behavior. Finally, Goldstein et al. [20] studied "annoying" (e.g., obtrusive, low quality) website ads and showed how they create economic costs for advertisers (i.e., waste) and cognitive costs for consumers.

## **Impacts of Digital Environments**

A still-emerging theme in recent years is how digital/social media environments impact consumer behavior [21-23]. The consequences can be thought of as environment-integral (i.e., digital environments influence behavior in those environments) or environment-incident (i.e., digital environments influence behavior in other, unrelated environments). It is interesting to see how the various informational and social characteristics of digital/social environments, such as being exposed to other consumers' opinions (e.g., reviews) or choices (e.g., bids in online auctions), or even just to friends' lives through social media, can impact subsequent behaviors. For instance, with respect to environment-integral consequences, Lambertson et al. [21] and Norton et al. [22] considered learning from strangers in digital environments. They find that consumers in competitive online settings infer interpersonal dissimilarity and act aggressively against ambiguous others (strangers) [21], and find that seeing online that others made the same choices as oneself can reduce, not increase, confidence in one's choices if others' justifications (e.g., in online reviews) are dissimilar [22]. Adopting a different perspective, Wilcox and Stephen [23] examined an environment-incident response with respect to how using Facebook affected self-control. They found that when exposed to closer friends on Facebook, consumers subsequently exhibited lower self-control in choices related to, for example, healthy behaviors (e.g., choosing a cookie instead of a healthier granola bar).

## **Mobile**

Consumer behavior in mobile settings is also increasingly important, as consumers use mobile devices more frequently. This is particularly interesting in shopping contexts. In an in-store shopping setting, Hui et al. [24] studied how consumers respond to mobile coupons in

physical stores, finding in a field experiment that mobile offers requiring consumers to deviate from their planned shopping paths can increase unplanned spending. In an online shopping setting, Brasel and Gips [25] focused on shopping on mobile devices (e.g., tablets) and specifically on how touching products (instead of clicking with a mouse) can increase feelings of psychological ownership and endowment. This is an interesting contribution because work on how consumers physically interface with mobile devices and how that influences decision making is scant but, as this article showed, important. Unrelated to shopping is work by Bart et al. [26] that considered how mobile display ads—which are very small and carry very little (if any) information—influence consumers’ brand attitudes and purchase intentions. They found that in many product categories mobile display ads have no effect, but that they do lift attitudes and intentions for high-involvement, utilitarian products (e.g., financial services).

### **Online WOM and Reviews**

WOM is the most-represented topic in digital and social marketing research, which is unsurprising given the reliance consumers seem to have on socially sourced online information. A number of sub-themes were covered recently. First, an interesting set of articles considered linguistic properties of online WOM and/or reviews [27-33], generally showing how perceptions of reviews and how influential they are can depend on subtle language-based properties. For instance, Kronrod and Danziger [27] showed that figurative (vs. literal) language in online reviews positively affected consumer attitudes and choice for hedonic goods. Moore [28] considered explanatory language in online reviews, finding that whether consumers explained actions or reactions affected perceived review helpfulness. Hamilton et al. [29] considered negative WOM, finding that using softening language when conveying negative opinions (e.g.,



“I don’t want to be negative, but...” increases perceived reviewer credibility and likability. Tang et al. [30] considered two kinds of neutral language, mixed (positive and negative) versus indifferent. They show that mixed neutral (vs. indifferent) WOM amplifies effects of WOM on purchasing. Ludwig et al. [31] studied affective language in reviews and examined how a review with linguistic style that is consistent with the typical linguistic style used for that product group influenced sales, finding that positive affect increases conversions (but at a diminishing rate), negative affect decreases conversions, and congruent linguistic styles are beneficial. Chen and Lurie [32] examined temporal contiguity language in online reviews (i.e., reviewers indicating they recently had the experience), finding that consumers discount positive reviewer opinions less if the experience was seemingly recent (i.e., presence of temporal contiguity cues).

Another important topic recently examined is differences between online and offline WOM. Lovett et al. [33] found that online WOM is driven by social and functional brand characteristics whereas offline WOM is driven by emotional brand characteristics. Eisingerich et al. [34] studied differences between transmitting WOM in social media (e.g., on Facebook) versus offline (in person), showing that consumers are less inclined to transmit WOM in social media because of a higher perceived social risk.

Finally, other recent articles considered additional online WOM-related issues. For instance, He and Bond [35] considered when online reviews provide good versus bad forecasts of consumer brand enjoyment, finding that the forecast error/discrepancy depends on the degree to which a reviewer’s and consumer’s preferences are similar. Cascio et al. [36] identified neural correlates of susceptibility to others’ opinions in online WOM settings, with susceptibility to social influence being related to brain regions involved with shifting personal preferences and considering others. He and Bond [37] focused on sets of online reviews (cf. single reviews) and

considered how consumers interpret opinion dispersion and whether it is attributed to the product or to reviewers' tastes being heterogeneous. Anderson and Simester [38] documented the prevalence of deceptive reviews posted by people who have not purchased a product, suggesting that the practice is not limited to competitors but includes existing customers with no financial incentive to bias online ratings. Finally, Barasch and Berger [39] examined social transmission behavior when consumers broadcast (to many, e.g., through mass-audience posts on Facebook or Twitter) versus narrowcast (to few, e.g., through messages to a few friends), finding that people share information that makes themselves not look bad when broadcasting (i.e., self focus) but share information that will be helpful to receivers when narrowcasting (i.e., other focus).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The digital/social media consumer behavior literature is fast-growing and largely focuses on phenomena that are practically relevant and theoretically interesting. Researchers have mostly considered how consumers use information (e.g., online WOM, reviews) available to them in digital/social media environments. Future research should continue this approach, although in a more expanded fashion. Consumers' behaviors other than those related to online WOM/reviews should be considered, and other types of information found (and inferences made) in online environments should be considered. For example, it would be interesting to consider the complex interplay between transmitter, receiver, linguistic/content, and context factors when it comes to antecedents and consequences of online WOM.

Another high-potential direction for future research is to consider how various kinds of digital environments (including social media and mobile) impact a wide variety of consumer outcomes, including psychological and economic constructs. Few articles have done this, though

it is likely that a multitude of consumer outcomes are influenced by the digital environments in which they are increasingly situated. It is also possible that some adverse consequences may be detected, similar to Wilcox and Stephen's [23] finding linking Facebook use to lower self control. In addition to this, the ways that consumers physically interact (i.e., interface) with digital environments needs deeper exploration, given what Brasel and Gips [25] found in terms of feelings of endowment when using touch-based interfaces to shop. In studying the impacts of digital environments on consumers, it will also be necessary to consider longer-term responses because these effects may be subtle but cumulatively important. Thus, one-shot experimental studies should be complemented by longitudinal experiments and archival data capturing consumers' digital exposures, online social interactions, and behaviors over time.

Finally, researchers should consider emerging important topics, particularly consumer privacy issues in the context of digital marketing and social media. Tucker [15] considered this to an extent, though a comprehensive understanding of how consumers think about their privacy, what they want to do to protect it, and how they value (or devalue) digital media services that protect (or not) privacy is still needed.

In conclusion, there has been much recent activity in the consumer behavior/psychology literature related to digital and social media marketing, and many important contributions to knowledge have been made. To move this literature forward, particularly given the fast-moving nature of digital settings, research that attempts to broaden our understandings of key phenomena, examines brand-new phenomena, and develops theories in an area that lacks an established theoretical base will be most valuable.

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[14]\*\* Lambrecht, Anja and Tucker, Catherine (2013), “When Does Retargeting Work? Information Specificity in Online Advertising,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, 50 (5), 561-576.

Retargeting means that consumers are targeted with personalized ads designed based on prior browsing history when they return to a website. The authors report a field experiment on a travel website and find that, generally, retargeted ads do worse than control ads that are generic/not personalized. This negative response is not found if, based on browsing histories, consumers’ preferences have evolved in the sense that they have gotten more precise.

[15]\*\* Tucker, Catherine E. (2014), “Social Networks, Personalized Advertising, and Privacy Controls,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, 51 (5), 546-562.

The author studies how consumers’ perceptions of control over personal information used for social media ad targeting (i.e., personalized ads) influence likelihood to click on ads, using data from a field experiment. Personalized ads did not perform well. However, when the website gave users more control over their personal information, personalized ads performed better. This finding is consistent with the idea that reactance-type responses can be mitigated by giving consumers a sense of (perceived) control or freedom of choice.

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The authors report six studies looking at the interplay between focal media content (e.g., a TV show or a movie) and digital video ads that come after viewing that content. They show that after watching content that evokes a deactivating emotion, consumers view energetic ads less and have lower recall compared to when they do not experience a deactivating emotion.

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[23] Wilcox, Keith, and Stephen, Andrew T. (2013), “Are Close Friends the Enemy? Online Social Networks, Self-Esteem, and Self-Control,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40 (1), 90-103.

The authors show that using Facebook, even for just five minutes, can potentially lower subsequent self-control in unrelated tasks (e.g., persistence with a mentally challenging task, healthy food choices). This effect occurs when consumers' Facebook “friends” are mostly strong ties (more close friends than acquaintances), and, perversely, occurs because time on Facebook being exposed to the lives of one's reasonably close friends boosts self-esteem (which in turn lowers self-control).

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[25]\*\* Brasel, S. Adam, and Gips, James (2014), “Tablets, touchscreens, and touchpads: How varying touch interfaces trigger psychological ownership and endowment,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 24 (2), 226-233.

The authors show that touchscreen interfaces—e.g., iPhones, iPads—impact online shopping behavior by enhancing the endowment effect. This is because touching (vs. clicking with a mouse) increases perceptions of psychological ownership for products when browsing online. This effect is stronger for products with high haptic importance (i.e., products where touching/feeling them is important in the evaluation).

[26]\* Bart, Yakov, Stephen, Andrew T., and Sarvary, Miklos (2014), “Which Products Are Best Suited to Mobile Advertising? A Field Study of Mobile Display Advertising Effects on Consumer Attitudes and Intentions,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, 51 (3), 270-285.

A study of 54 mobile display ad campaigns, each with test (saw ad) and control (did not see ad) groups, finds that mobile display ads only positively affect brand favorability and purchase intention for products that are both utilitarian and high involvement (e.g., financial services). The authors explain that this could be because these types of products trigger more deliberate “central route” processing (following the elaboration likelihood model) that leads to greater persuasive effectiveness.

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[28]\*\* Moore, Sarah G. (2015), “Attitude Predictability and Helpfulness in Online Reviews: The Role of Explained Actions and Reactions,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42 (1), 30-44.

The author examines one type of linguistic property of online reviews, the use of explanations by review authors. Explanations can be about actions such as why a consumer decided to buy the brand, or reactions such as why they feel the way they do about the brand. It is found that reviews for utilitarian products have more action explanations, whereas for hedonic products it is the opposite (i.e., more reaction explanations). When utilitarian (hedonic) products' reviews have action (reaction) explanations, they lead to higher review helpfulness perceptions, predictability of product attitudes, and, ultimately, product choice.

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The authors used a dataset featuring both online and offline WOM for approximately 600 brands, which were characterized on 13 different dimensions. These were grouped into social, emotional, and functional drivers of WOM. They found that the most important driver of offline WOM is emotional brand characteristics. Social and functional characteristics, however, were found to be the most important drivers of online WOM.

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