

# The Role of Digital and Social Media Marketing in Consumer Behavior

Anupam Gattani

*Student, Department of Computer Science Engineering, AITR, Indore, India*

**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 behaviour, and (iv) mobile environments.

**Index Terms**—digital, social media marketing, consumer behavior

## I. 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 number of internet users in India is about 323 Million and around 3.2 Billion on this planet. Younger people—the next generation of mass consumers—have similarly high levels. People also spend increasing time online.

For example, in the India, over the last decade the number of hours spent online by people has more than doubled, and now averages 20.5 hours per week. Social media has fuelled part of this growth: worldwide there are now more than 2.46 billion people using social media, and Facebook alone now has approximately 1 billion active users per day. 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, 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.

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 behaviour in digital environments.

This has been happening over the last decade, with increasing amounts of research focusing on digital consumer behaviour 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 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.

## II. 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. Belk 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. 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 behaviours on social media more generally, since signalling 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.

## III. RESPONSE TO DIGITAL ADVERTISING

Digital advertising is a major topic in the marketing literature and, with respect to consumer behaviour, considers how consumers respond to various aspects of digital ads. A number of recent articles considered behavioural aspects of digital advertising from various perspectives. One interesting perspective taken in a few articles was based around how consumers overcome (assumed) psychological reactance due to personalization of digital ad targeting. Schumann et al.

considered how negative reactions to personalization could be overcome with normative reciprocity appeals (instead of utility appeals). Lambrecht and Tucker 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 found that personalized website ads are more favourably 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. Luo et al. 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. studied responses to search engine advertising, finding that when consumers search for less-popular keywords their searches are more effortful. Puccinelli et al. 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 consumer's experience "deactivating" emotions (e.g., sadness) it is harder to view energetic ads. Dinner et al. 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 behaviour. Finally, Goldstein et al. 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.

#### IV. EFFECT OF DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

A still-emerging theme in recent years is how digital/social media environments impact consumer behavior. 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, Lamberton et al. and Norton et al. 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), 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. Adopting a different

perspective, Wilcox and Stephen 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).

#### V. MOBILE ENVIRONMENTS

Consumer behaviour in mobile settings is also increasingly important, as consumers use mobile devices more frequently. This is particularly interesting in shopping contexts. In an instore shopping setting, studied how consumers respond to mobile coupons in 8 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 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. 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).

#### VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there has been much recent activity in the consumer behaviour/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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