

New roles of social media in the marketplace call for new strategic approaches in marketing

Today, the fact that firms and customers are interacting in new, more complex and multi-faceted ways through social media is neither surprising nor novel. It is in fact the norm, a thing that is expected and a component that is advocated to be an integral part of any comprehensive marketing effort. The exponentially growing popularity of digital platforms has indeed generated a *social media tsunami* (Sheth, 2020) that has flooded the Indian marketplace, as an example, with 326.1 m users in 2018, and with a pre-COVID estimation of 447.9 m users in 2023 [1].

The term *social media* encompasses many platforms that allow users–consumers–to build networks and share all sorts of information, opinions and feelings in a dynamic and egalitarian way (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Peters *et al.*, 2013). According to Li *et al.* (2021), the emergence and growth of social media triggered three important changes in the marketplace. First, firms and customers are now connected, and they interact in ways that were previously inconceivable. For example, many companies have partially or fully migrated their customer services to social media platforms in order to capitalize on the real-time interaction and to take advantage of the greater flexibility offered by these platforms (Gunarathne *et al.*, 2018). And yet, the ever-changing and unpredictable “future” has barely revealed itself—a host of technological advances like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) will foster newer forms of interaction that are likely to play significant roles in how social media networks are created and used by both consumers and marketers alike. The capability of VR to allow consumers to shop in a virtual, social environment with friends and relatives located in different locations through VR systems (Meißner *et al.*, 2020), the development of social AR technologies (De Ruyter *et al.*, 2020), and the Internet of things (Appel *et al.*, 2020) pose new challenges for marketers and social media strategists. Consumers of tomorrow will experience a world in which social media will influence, and quite dramatically change, an even wider range of human activities. We can expect that the rapidly decreasing online/offline dichotomy will eventually simply fade away (Appel *et al.*, 2020).

Sharma and Joshi (2021), the first article included in this special issue, reflects on the marketing implications of a relatively recent technological development: mobile coupons (M-coupons). M-coupons offer some obvious advantages for both marketers and consumers. For consumers, it offers convenience and easy accessibility—no clipping, saving, or remembering to carry them with you. For advertisers too it offers cost savings and an easy way to distribute to select audiences. Indeed, as the authors highlight, it has been reported that redemption rates of M-coupons exceed that of traditional coupons delivered via print media, and it is projected that the gap between traditional coupon redemption and the redemption rate of digital coupons will continue to grow. Of importance for social media strategists, M-coupons, compared to traditional coupons, offer the additional advantage that they may be easily shared multiple times to multiple recipients, including those who may have not elected to opt out of receiving such materials directly from marketers.

Second, and arguably even more important, social media has changed the way that a firm and its customers influence each other. Today, more than ever before, consumers are the primary drivers of all of the business’ marketing processes (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015). The development of the Web 2.0 and the inclusion of consumer dialog in the form of user-generated content (UGC) led, especially, to a considerable erosion of the impact that marketer



generated communications have on consumers' decisions. Marketers are being forced to proactively develop plans and strategies to respond to and counter negative messages posted on social media (Esmark Jones *et al.*, 2018). UGC can potentially impact many aspects of a firm, ranging from products and brands to chief executive officers (CEOs) and company's employees. The growing influence of consumers over marketing processes has also led to the emergence of brand new fields such as "influencer marketing," and such updated definitions of consumers' roles as "influencers" and "followers." *Influencers* are ordinary individuals with many followers on social media who post appealing content related to product and brand preferences that are consistent with their personal lifestyles (Cotter, 2019), while the term *follower* refers to someone who subscribes to the influencers' content and follows them on social media (Abidin, 2018). The impact of social media on society in general and consumers in particular is demonstrated by the observation that *influencers* have surpassed *celebrities* as the most influential social media personalities among millennials (Argyris *et al.*, 2020), a clear indication of the relevance of social media in general, and influencers in particular, to marketers.

Mishra and Singh (2021), the second article included in this special issue, highlights the greater impact of UGC on consumers' decisions than marketer-generated content because such information is rated high on important dimensions like credibility and trustworthiness. It is, therefore, imperative that marketers understand the underlying dimensions of social currency (i.e. an assessment of the value of the information generated/shared by users) so that they may develop appropriate marketing strategies and tactics to be able to deliver more meaningful and satisfying experiences that will ultimately boost their brand's equity.

Third, the growing popularity of social media has had a parallel growth of social media data availability, allowing for better management of customer relationships and improvements in data-driven decision-making (Libai *et al.*, 2010), while also increasing the risk of information overload (Chen *et al.*, 2009). Similar to the emergence of influencer marketing, the abundance of data and the vast amount of UGC stored on social media platforms has led to the development of a distinct new field: social media analytics (Holsapple *et al.*, 2018). Undoubtedly, the abundance of UGC has important implications for a wide range of marketing-related decisions, but let us briefly discuss how consumer-generated data have contributed to changing the current paradigm in marketing research.

Traditional marketing research is limited by the researchers' selection of variables—e.g. the selection of variables included in a questionnaire. While this traditional approach warrants that the variables selected are relevant for the particular marketing problem being addressed, it carries the risk that those set of variables may not be important to a company's customer base. In sharp contrast, social media enables the acquisition of richer data that have the potential of providing researchers with unique insights about topics that have greater relevance to customers by virtue of the fact that it has been garnered from thoughts and opinions that users took the time and effort to express on these platforms (Fresneda *et al.*, 2021). Such valuable insights would be missed in marketing research that relies exclusively on the measurement of researcher-determined concepts and constructs. Given the impact of social media for marketing strategy, SAJBS commissioned a special issue on the topic.

Contributions of special issue articles

A vast amount of research on the impact of coupons and other such promotional tactics on consumers' purchase behavior has been conducted focusing on how such factors as price consciousness and coupon proneness influence redemption rates. In contrast, Sharma and Joshi (2021) investigate consumers' inclination to share M-coupons via social networking sites (SNSs), specifically in the South Asian context. The authors outline that

motivation to share such digital coupons may be intrinsic and/or extrinsic, and they attempt to investigate how each of them impacts the willingness to share M-coupons via social sites, especially ones that are likely to be dominated by weak ties, infrequent indirect interactions and lack of emotional connection.

Mishra and Singh (2021) present a first-of-its-kind empirical validation of previously identified dimensions of social currency specifically in the context of users in the Indian subcontinent. As the authors discuss, it is apparent that the dimension identified as advocacy emerged as the most influential factor driving social currency among the Indian users, closely followed by identity and affiliation. The importance of this article's contribution stems not only from the fact that it is the first to attempt to validate dimensions of social currency in the context of Indian users. More broadly, it highlights the often overlooked fact that the dimensions identified in extant research are likely to vary by product, situation and context.

The pair of articles included in this special issue, extend our current knowledge on social media usage and behavior to the South Asian context. Both papers highlight how lessons learned from published research emanating from the "western" world may need to be adapted to suit the case of South Asian markets that are unique, and different from Western markets, from a socio-cultural perspective. However, both articles limited themselves to exclusively understanding the behavior of *Indian* consumers. Indeed, several South Asian countries may share subsets of core values. Yet, at a broader level, these articles demonstrate the need for future research on consumer behavior on digital platforms and the ensuing implications for social-media marketing to pay closer attention to the unique dynamics within each of the subcultures under the broader umbrella we refer to as South Asia. It would be beneficial, for example, to conduct a comprehensive investigation to compare and contrast consumer behavior with respect to social media among individuals hailing from a variety of South Asian countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

In addition to expanding the customer base to include more South Asian countries, it may be worthwhile for future research to incorporate implement other research designs that go beyond quantitative, descriptive, survey-based research. Examples include such qualitative research techniques like *phenomenological studies* that document lived experiences and *ethnographic research*. Such methods may uncover latent aspects that may improve our understanding of how the concepts and behaviors being scrutinized are embedded in the deeper cultural context. The articles included in this special issue have undoubtedly shone light on the importance of viewing theories and processes as they relate to consumer behavior on digital platforms through a pair of *South-Asian* lenses. It is our hope that the findings reported in these articles will challenge future researchers to find answers to a host of hitherto unanswered queries about digital consumer behavior and the implications for marketing strategy to influence South Asian consumers.

Future research

Beyond the several domains already discussed, social media marketing grants many other interesting avenues for future and we want to briefly discuss two of them: the unforeseeable COVID-19 pandemic and non-humans in social media. To add an extra layer of complexity to an already complex arena, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed lockdowns, mobility restrictions and social distancing, leading to an even greater reliance on social media platforms (Apuke and Omar, 2021; Islam *et al.*, 2020) that resulted in sudden, unanticipated and *yet-to-be-investigated* changes in consumer behavior. Banking, grocery shopping, restaurants and food delivery services are just a few instances of how variations in consumer behavior during the pandemic have deeply impacted the conduct of business (Laato *et al.*, 2020; Naeem and Ozuem, 2021). Many of these behavioral changes were fueled by information sharing on social

media (Kim *et al.*, 2021), “responsible” for increasing the levels of anxiety, stress and fear among consumers, which in turn led to a plethora of such seemingly irrational behaviors as the hoarding of hand sanitizer, latex gloves, face masks and soap (Laato *et al.*, 2020), including a shocking toilet-paper buying frenzy around the globe (Garbe *et al.*, 2020). Future research will need to address both the depth and the breadth of these pandemic-related changes in consumers’ behaviors, the continuity (or not) of these changes in the post-COVID era, potential new roles of the post-COVID social media, and the development of new and improved social media marketing strategies to address them appropriately.

A final note to succinctly address the rise of a relatively recent phenomenon in social media yet to be thoroughly studied by marketers: the positive influence of non-humans in social media. Extensive research has investigated such potentially negative impacts of the use of *bots* in social media as using them as fake followers with the explicit intention of artificially inflating the reach numbers of influencers (Bogost, 2018). Conversely, little is known about well-established virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela—with more than 3M followers in Instagram—or Blawko—a YouTuber virtual influencer with over 100k followers on Instagram [2]. Non-humans in social media constitute an exciting avenue of exploration for social media marketers and social media strategists.

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Notes

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278341/number-of-social-network-users-in-selected-countries/>
2. <https://influencer.com/blog/en/10-virtual-influencers-to-keep-an-eye-on-in-2021/>

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