

Uncover the Trends of Digital Consumer Culture: New Frontiers and Future Directions

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Publication Details: Received: 25/04/23; Revised: 19/05/23; Accepted: 19/06/23

ABSTRACT

In this editorial, we delve into the ever-evolving landscape of digital consumer culture and interactive marketing, spotlighting emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities that shape the future of this dynamic field. We contend that the ascent of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way consumers engage with brands, products, and services, ushering in a new set of values, norms, and practices defining digital consumer culture. Drawing upon Frese's (2015) value-norm-practice framework, we focus on core values such as immediacy, personalisation, and authenticity, elucidating how these values influence consumer expectations and behaviours in the digital age. Moreover, we dissect the norms and practices characterising digital consumer culture, including the expectation of perpetual connectivity, the prominence of user-generated content, and the growing preference for access over ownership. Transitioning to the realm of interactive marketing strategies, we underscore the significance of harnessing customer data, emerging technologies, and immersive experiences to forge meaningful and personalised brand engagements. Looking ahead, we contemplate the future directions of digital consumer culture and interactive marketing, spotlighting the transformative potential of AI, blockchain, and purpose-driven marketing initiatives. Concurrently, we acknowledge the ethical considerations and challenges that these developments present. In conclusion, we stress that brands must prioritise transparency, authenticity, and social responsibility in their marketing endeavours. Collaborative efforts with consumers and society are pivotal in shaping a more inclusive, sustainable, and value-driven digital future.

Keywords: Digital consumer culture; Interactive marketing; Digital Marketing; Consumer engagement; Value co-creation; Emerging technologies

INTRODUCTION

Recent statistics reveal alarming trends in screen time, indicating that individuals globally spend nearly seven hours daily on digital devices. This heightened connectivity, coupled with the diminishing efficacy of traditional marketing methods, profoundly influences how organisations engage with consumers (Krishen et al., 2021). In today's digital milieu,

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consumers gravitate toward digital interactions, virtual communities, and personalised experiences, forging a culture steeped in digital engagement (Dey et al., 2020). Consequently, businesses must adapt by integrating interactive marketing strategies to connect with individuals effectively in meaningful ways.

Digital consumer culture encompasses shared behaviours, values, and attitudes shaped by interactions with digital technologies (Dey et al., 2020). Marked by personalisation and a focus on community, this culture prompts a paradigm shift in marketing approaches, urging brands to digitally engage consumers to foster loyalty (Syamimi Masrani and Nik Husain, 2022). Imagine receiving a personalised birthday message from your favourite coffee shop, complete with a coupon for a custom-made latte. This is not just marketing; it is a glimpse into the personalised, connected, and ever-present world of digital consumer culture. It is worth noting that the boundaries between online interactions and offline experiences are becoming increasingly blurred (Dey et al., 2020), especially with the emergence of augmented reality (AR) in retail settings. Through AR technology, brands are able to offer consumers immersive and interactive shopping experiences that seamlessly integrate the digital and physical worlds (Lavoye et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). One successful example is the implementation of AR by the Swedish furniture retailer, IKEA, through their IKEA Place app that allows consumers to utilise their smartphone camera to virtually place a true-to-scale 3D model of an IKEA product within their living space. This innovative feature empowers consumers to make informed purchasing decisions, thereby reducing the uncertainty often associated with online shopping.

Interactive marketing strategies are essential for successful brand engagement in the age of digital consumer culture, leveraging digital technologies and platforms to facilitate two-way collaboration and co-creation between brands and consumers (Wang, 2021). User-generated content campaigns, such as Starbucks' "White Cup Contest," encourage customers to design their own cup art and share it on social media, fostering a sense of community and brand loyalty (Chuang, 2020). Similarly, Nike's "Nike By You" customisation platform allows customers to personalise their shoes, creating a unique and engaging experience that strengthens the brand-consumer relationship. Such interactive methods empower brands to tap into their customers' creativity, amplify brand messages, and create a sense of community and belonging (Geng et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2020).

The relationship between digital consumer culture and interactive marketing thrives on a dynamic and reciprocal value exchange between brands and consumers. As digital technologies evolve and consumer expectations shift, brands must remain agile and responsive in adapting their strategies to meet the evolving needs and preferences of their target audiences (Krishen et al., 2021; Wang, 2021). By embracing the principles of digital consumer culture and investing in interactive marketing methods, brands can forge more authentic, engaging, and profitable relationships with their customers, driving long-term growth and success in an increasingly competitive marketplace. However, navigating the complexities of digital consumer culture and implementing effective interactive marketing strategies poses challenges. The proliferation of digital channels and the fragmentation of consumer attention make it increasingly arduous for brands to cut through the noise and meaningfully connect with their audiences (Quinn et al., 2016). Additionally, the vast amount of consumer data generated by digital interactions raises concerns about privacy, security, and the ethical use of personal information, necessitating a delicate balance between personalisation and trust (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022).

From viral hashtag challenges to augmented reality try-ons, technology has fundamentally transformed the shopping experience. Where is this trend leading us? This editorial aims to contribute to the burgeoning field of research into digital consumer culture and interactive marketing by focusing on emerging frontiers and forward-looking marketing directions. Its objective is to provide a comprehensive overview of this emerging field's present and future, explore the multifaceted nature of digital consumer culture, present emerging trends and technologies, and discuss innovative strategies for engagement and value creation.

DECODING DIGITAL CONSUMER CULTURE: VALUES, NORMS, AND PRACTICES

Consumer culture underscores the centrality of consumption activities and market interactions in shaping lifestyles and cultural identities within modern societies (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Digital consumer culture, specifically, strongly emphasises consumer empowerment, the integration of online and offline experiences, and the fluidity of identities (Dey et al., 2020). This unique cultural domain has evolved from consumer interactions with technologies such as the Internet, social media, and mobile devices (Sharmin et al., 2021; Zolfaghari et al., 2023). The ongoing interplay between digital consumer culture and digital acculturation influences how consumers engage with digital platforms (Dey et al., 2020). To grasp the complexities of digital consumer culture, it is essential to examine its values, behavioural norms, and characteristic practices. Frese's (2015) value-norm-practice framework provides a valuable tool for this analysis, enabling exploration of how technologies reshape consumer behaviour and expectations across multiple levels.

Values in Digital Consumer Culture

Digital consumer culture is characterised by unique values that profoundly influence consumer behaviour and expectations. As conceptualised by Frese (2015), values represent the fundamental principles, beliefs, and ideals guiding individuals within a particular society or group. In the realm of digital consumer culture, the values of immediacy, personalisation, and authenticity hold paramount importance, each exerting a substantial influence on consumer attitudes and decisions.

The Need for Immediacy

Digital consumer culture focuses on immediacy, fuelled by technological advancements that enable consumers to expect swift responses, seamless access to products and services, and tailored experiences (Ghorbani et al., 2022). Social media further amplifies this expectation, as delays in brand interactions can result in dissatisfaction among consumers (Rabbanee et al., 2023). In an oversaturated market, consumers are increasingly unwilling to tolerate unresponsive experiences, opting for alternatives that cater to their immediate needs. Consequently, brands that can swiftly deliver personalised experiences often gain a competitive advantage (Liu, 2023), leveraging technologies such as chatbots and real-time messaging to meet this demand for immediacy.

However, the relentless pursuit of immediacy in digital consumer culture raises crucial questions about its potential impacts on consumer well-being and sustainable business practices. Does immediacy genuinely enhance the consumer experience, or does it fuel a cycle of ever-escalating expectations? How can brands strike a balance between addressing

immediate needs and fostering enduring customer loyalty? Moreover, the emphasis on immediacy within digital consumer culture risks undermining patience, the capacity for delayed gratification, and the ability to engage deeply with experiences (Shirai, 2023). This need for immediacy may also compel brands to prioritise speed over quality, potentially leading to declining product or service standards. As brands rush to meet consumer expectations for instant gratification, they may make concessions on sustainability, ethics, or innovation, with potential long-term ramifications for both brand reputation and societal impact.

The Desire for Personalization

Personalisation is another foundational value within digital consumer culture (Plangger et al., 2022; Schweidel et al., 2022). Consumers increasingly anticipate brands to harness data and technology for tailoring recommendations, offers, and overall brand interactions to their individual preferences. This emphasis arises from a desire for customised experiences resonating with their unique identities, fostering a sense of connection and relevance (Kumar, 2021; Schweidel et al., 2022). Successfully delivering personalisation becomes a crucial differentiator, enhancing engagement, satisfaction, and long-term brand loyalty. This value intertwines with technological advancements, enabling businesses to gather and analyse extensive consumer data, fueling highly personalised marketing and communication strategies (Plangger et al., 2022). This data-driven approach facilitates product and service customisation, targeted marketing campaigns, and personalised communication resonating with consumers personally. Utilizing technology to tailor experiences for consumers helps businesses secure an advantage in the digital market and meet the evolving expectations of tech-savvy consumers.

The personalisation-privacy paradox theory theoretically illuminates the delicate balance consumers navigate between their desire for personalised experiences and concerns regarding privacy and data security (Cloarec, 2020). Numerous scholars have expressed significant concerns about the potential for algorithmic bias and the reinforcement of echo chambers resulting from the pursuit of personalisation in digital consumer culture (Airoidi and Rokka, 2022; Darmody and Zwick, 2020; Ulver, 2022). Personalisation algorithms aim to deliver content and recommendations aligned with users' preferences and behaviours. However, they may inadvertently restrict exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences, potentially fostering "filter bubbles" reinforcing confirmation bias and hindering personal growth and understanding (Seargeant and Tagg, 2019). Moreover, dependence on personalised algorithms could perpetuate existing social inequalities and discriminatory practices. Biased data training or inherent biases in algorithms might replicate and amplify these biases in recommendations and decision-making processes (Ulver, 2022), exacerbating systemic barriers and limiting access to opportunities for certain groups.

The Emphasis on Authenticity

Consumers in the digital age increasingly seek authentic experiences, products, and interactions with brands (Muniz and Guzmán, 2023). They value transparency, genuineness, and alignment with their own ethical beliefs. Consumers prioritize authenticity because it builds trust, enhances credibility, and deepens emotional bonds with brands, which in turn boosts brand loyalty and encourages positive recommendations from consumers (Murshed et al., 2023). The essence of authenticity lies in its ability to establish a trustworthy and credible relationship between consumers and brands, thereby fostering loyalty and promoting favorable word-of-mouth endorsements (Murshed et al., 2023). Beyond being merely a marketing strategy,

authenticity is a fundamental aspect that drives consumer engagement and loyalty in the digital landscape.

Moreover, authenticity extends beyond branding to encompass various aspects of consumer experiences, including cultural gastronomic experiences, influencer marketing, and consumer behaviour in different contexts (Sun et al., 2022). However, digital environments complicate the notion of authenticity. How can genuine authenticity be defined when identities can be curated and performances staged? Can brands ever fully embody authenticity, or is it an ideal they can only strive towards? Additionally, the pursuit of authenticity risks privileging certain narratives or definitions of what is considered “authentic,” potentially marginalising experiences that do not fit dominant norms. Intersectionality plays a crucial role here: how do factors such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status influence perceptions of authenticity within digital consumer culture? Furthermore, there is a risk of authenticity becoming commercialised. How can consumers discern genuine authenticity when it becomes a marketing tactic?

Norms Shaping Consumer Behavior

Digital consumer culture is marked by unique social norms that shape the behaviours and expectations of its participants. Grasping these norms is imperative for crafting successful marketing strategies within this ever-evolving environment. Foremost among these norms are the expectation of uninterrupted connectivity, the significance placed on user-generated content (UGC), and the collaborative essence of the digital sphere.

The Expectation of Constant Connectivity

The widespread adoption of smartphones and mobile devices has accustomed consumers to perpetual accessibility, blurring the boundaries between online and offline realms (Dey et al., 2020). Today, consumers anticipate brands to be available and responsive round-the-clock, catering to their demand for immediacy. The Theory of the Network Society posits that the ascendancy of information and communication technologies has forged networked societies, wherein social structures orbit around electronically processed information networks (Castells, 2023). In this framework, constant connectivity has emerged as the standard, compelling brands to ensure uninterrupted availability and responsiveness.

Nevertheless, psychological concerns arise from the perpetual need to stay connected. This pressure can engender anxiety, stress, and burnout, as individuals feel compelled to monitor updates and notifications incessantly. The fear of missing out (FOMO) can disrupt work-life balance, strain relationships, and detrimentally affect mental well-being (Fitz et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2023). Brands must be cognizant that strategies reliant on constant connectivity, such as push notifications, may inadvertently exacerbate these adverse outcomes. Furthermore, this norm has the potential to exacerbate societal disparities. Access to reliable digital infrastructure and proficiency in digital literacy are increasingly indispensable for full integration into the networked society. Those lacking these resources risk exclusion and marginalisation (Castells, 2023), thereby widening social and economic inequalities.

Emphasis on User-Generated Content (UGC)

Digital consumer culture heavily emphasises User-Generated Content (UGC) (Goh et al., 2013). Through social media, consumers have evolved from passive recipients of brand messaging to

active creators and curators. Their recommendations and reviews wield significant influence over purchasing decisions, prompting brands to foster user participation and collaboration (Stephen, 2016). However, UGC raises concerns about its authenticity, credibility, and quality (Naab and Sehl, 2017). With consumers increasingly relying on peer recommendations, discerning genuine, unbiased opinions from those influenced by commercial interests or personal agendas becomes challenging. Moreover, brands leveraging UGC for marketing purposes risk co-opting participatory culture for corporate gain rather than authentic consumer expression (Carah and Angus, 2018). This emphasis on UGC may also contribute to the commodification of personal experiences and relationships. As consumers share their opinions, stories, and images online, they inadvertently transform their private lives into public performances susceptible to monetisation and exploitation by brands and platforms (Rabbanee et al., 2023; Seargeant and Tagg, 2019; Valtysson, 2010). This blurs the line between authentic self-expression and strategic self-branding, while also devaluing privacy and intimacy in the digital realm.

Participatory Nature

Consumers are increasingly seeking opportunities to contribute to brand narratives, co-create products and services, and engage in meaningful dialogue with brands (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). This participatory aspect is considered a potential norm of digital consumer culture (Liu, 2023), leading to the emergence of interactive marketing strategies prioritising consumer engagement and collaboration, such as social media campaigns and crowdsourcing initiatives. The co-creation paradigm elucidates the participatory nature of digital environments in digital consumer culture, indicating a shift towards consumers actively engaging in brand narratives, co-creating products, and interacting meaningfully with brands. Consequently, interactive marketing strategies emphasising consumer participation and collaboration have been adopted (Busca and Bertrandias, 2020; Ind et al., 2020; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2020).

However, the degree of consumer influence on brand decisions remains debatable, with brands ultimately retaining control, potentially rendering consumer contributions tokenistic. Moreover, participation in brand-related activities may evolve into unpaid labour for the brand, raising concerns about exploitation and alienation. Importantly, the participatory nature of digital environments may not be equally accessible to all. Factors such as technical skills, cultural capital, and social networks can impact an individual's ability to benefit from co-creation opportunities (Itani et al., 2023).

Digital Practices and Consumption Patterns

The distinctive practices shaping digital consumer culture have profound implications for marketing and our understanding of shifting consumer behaviours. Two of the most significant trends are the rise of mobile-first consumption and the growing preference for access-based models over traditional ownership.

Mobile-first Consumption

The pervasiveness of smartphones and mobile devices is driving the trend of mobile-first consumption (Narang and Shankar, 2019). Consumers increasingly rely on mobile platforms for various activities, including shopping, banking, entertainment, and socialising. This shift emphasises the need for optimised user experiences on mobile devices and tailored mobile marketing strategies (Save, 2014). However, the rise of mobile-first consumption also prompts

critical questions. Does the growing reliance on mobile devices compromise consumer privacy and autonomy? How do targeted advertising and personalisation techniques on mobile platforms contribute to a culture of surveillance and manipulation? Additionally, the widespread adoption of mobile-first practices raises concerns about psychological attachment to mobile devices and their potential impact on mental health and interpersonal relationships. As dependence on mobile devices grows, anxiety and stress levels may increase, and the ability to engage in authentic face-to-face interactions may decrease.

Preference for Access Over Ownership

Digital consumers are increasingly favouring access over ownership, leading to a surge in usage-based consumption. The popularity of streaming platforms, rental services, and subscription models reflects a shift towards valuing experiences and access to resources without the traditional burdens of ownership (Lu and Kandampully, 2016). Access-based Consumption theory elucidates this trend, highlighting evolving consumer priorities and the allure of flexibility (Catulli et al., 2013; Gruen, 2017; Lawson et al., 2021). However, this preference for access raises important questions about consumer identity, attachment, and sustainability (Catulli et al., 2013). Do consumers sacrifice the psychological benefits typically associated with ownership, such as control, security, and self-expression? While these models may contribute to a more resource-efficient economy, do they inadvertently perpetuate disposability and waste? Furthermore, the preference for access may stem from a desire for adaptability in the face of economic disruptions and rapid technological advancements. Nonetheless, it may also reinforce feelings of impermanence and detachment as relationships with goods and services become increasingly transient. Importantly, the prevalence of this trend may vary across regions and cultures, underscoring the significance of considering global contexts.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In conclusion, this editorial paper suggests that further research is needed, particularly in areas related to the rise of AI and machine learning, immersive retail technologies, blockchain and decentralisation, and purpose-driven marketing initiatives. These emerging trends significantly influence how consumers search for and purchase products and services. By delving deeper into these areas, researchers can acquire significant understanding of the changing dynamics of digital consumer culture and interactive marketing, equipping brands and marketers to modify their strategies adeptly in line with shifting consumer behaviors and expectations.

The Rise of AI and Machine Learning (ML)

AI and machine learning (ML) hold the capacity to revolutionise brand-consumer interactions (Dey et al., 2020; Haleem et al., 2022; Krishen et al., 2021; Krishnan et al., 2022; Wedel et al., 2020). By analysing vast datasets, personalising recommendations, and predicting consumer behavior, AI holds the potential to create hyper-tailored, seamless experiences (Kumar, 2021). Nevertheless, as AI and ML systems advance, it is crucial to address potential issues such as bias, inequality, and ethical considerations (Ferrara, 2023). It is crucial for brands to emphasize transparency, accountability, and fairness in their application of AI and machine learning, guaranteeing that their systems are developed and managed to uphold social responsibility and enhance consumer welfare.

Immersive Retail Technologies

The widespread adoption of immersive technologies, such as VR, AR, and mixed reality (MR), continues to blur the lines between the physical and digital worlds (Dey et al., 2020). Brands can leverage these technologies to transport consumers to captivating environments, facilitate virtual product interactions, and craft emotionally compelling narratives (Van Laer et al., 2019). As consumers spend more time in virtual and augmented environments, there is a risk that they may become disconnected from the physical world and genuine human connections. Therefore, brands must prioritise the creation of immersive experiences that are not only captivating and enjoyable but also meaningful and socially conscious, fostering real-world impact and positive change.

Blockchain and Decentralization

Blockchain and related decentralised technologies have the potential to disrupt traditional models of data ownership, privacy, and security, potentially empowering consumers with greater agency over their personal information (Boukis, 2019). By utilising blockchain-based platforms and protocols, brands can establish more transparent, secure, and fair relationships with consumers, facilitating innovative forms of value exchange and collaboration. Nonetheless, it is vital to acknowledge that blockchain and decentralised technologies are still in the nascent stages of development. Challenges such as scalability, interoperability, and user experience need to be effectively addressed. Additionally, the decentralised nature of these technologies may require brands to reevaluate their business models and governance structures, transitioning from centralised control to more distributed and collaborative approaches.

Purpose-Driven Marketing Initiatives

Consumers are increasingly driven by values, seeking brands that align with their beliefs and demonstrate a commitment to positive social and environmental impact (Krishen et al., 2021; Wang, 2021). To meet these expectations, brands must adopt a more authentic and mission-driven approach to interactive marketing, leveraging their platforms and resources to address social and environmental challenges and create shared value for all stakeholders (Caliandro et al., 2024). This necessitates moving beyond superficial cause-related marketing campaigns and short-term CSR initiatives and instead embedding purpose and social impact into the core of their business strategies and operations. Achieving this requires a fundamental shift in mindset and culture, as well as a willingness to collaborate with consumers, communities, and other stakeholders to co-create solutions and drive systemic change.

CONCLUSION

The dynamic landscape of digital consumer culture reveals a future where technological advancement, shifting social values, and changing consumer expectations intersect. To thrive in this environment, brands must prioritise transparency, authenticity, and a commitment to social responsibility alongside their pursuit of innovation. This entails continuous experimentation, adaptation, and a collaborative approach rooted in understanding the evolving needs of consumers. By staying informed about emerging trends while anchoring strategies in enduring values, such as the need for genuine connection, brands can shape a sustainable and

purpose-driven future. Ultimately, the trajectory of digital consumer culture and interactive marketing hinges on the collective decisions of brands, consumers, and society.

FUNDING

This work was financially supported by “Study on the Realisation Mechanism of Value Co-creation of ‘Yue Zi Hao’ Agricultural Products Regional Brands under the Perspective of Digital Marketing” (Project No. GD22YGL06), funded by Guangdong Philosophy and Social Science Planning 2022.

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