

Social Media Marketing: Evolution and Change

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Historically, communication has facilitated the relationship between sellers and buyers, with sellers using words, signs and symbols for drawing the attention of potential customers to their products and persuading them to buy them. While the underlying goals of marketing communications—differentiate, remind, inform, and persuade (Fill, 1999)—remain unchanged, the nature of marketing communications has changed with the development of new media systems, ever-growing in scope and complexity. Web 2.0 technologies, specifically the social media, have added the element of real-time interactivity, removing the traditional restrictions of time and geography.

The most significant consequence of social media has been the *shift of power* from the institution to the individual. Social media gave users a voice, an open platform where they could connect, collaborate and co-create content for themselves and others. This user-generated content is perceived to be more trustworthy and has been found to be a bigger influence on consumer behavior and purchase decisions.

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These shifts in the consumer-brand relationship have thrown up new challenges and opportunities for marketers. Marketers are in a precarious position, where both the offline and online brand-consumer interactions can have immediate, global ramifications due to the viral propagation of information on social media. Nonetheless, social media offers an invaluable opportunity to build sustainable bonds with consumers and to create and facilitate brand advocacy by encouraging positive conversations about the brand among consumers. Thus, these consumer conversations have necessitated reshaping the content of marketing messages and the way they are distributed (Landry, Ude, & Vollmer, 2007).

PURPOSE

The prolific success of social media platforms (SMPs) such as Facebook, Orkut, MySpace and Twitter caught the attention of researchers and business practitioners globally. Marketers started looking at social media as a new avenue to create profitable relationships with consumers. Researchers suggest that the online environment can provide brands with structural asset, scale and process advantages in terms of a proactive devoted customer base, online consumer data and new campaign concepts (Edelman, 2007). Recently, brands have started allocating a significant portion of their marketing budgets to social media marketing (SMM).

Despite the exponential growth of SMM, certain issues remain unresolved. Marketers are still unsure of how to measure the impact of their social media strategy and its contribution to the bottom line, and how to use social media to build and sustain value-creating relationships with their customers (Kumar, Hsiao, & Chiu, 2009). Furthermore, social media research is still in its nascent stage and yet to evolve as a separate marketing sub-discipline.

With this thought, we systematically review prior research to discern a coherent pattern in the extant social media literature and present a holistic view of the insights derived. We chart the evolution of social media research and attempt to identify the underlying themes from the communication perspective. Further, we propose a model with an integrated perspective on communication through traditional and social media. We seek to identify the gaps present in the extant literature with the objective of providing structure and direction for future research.

METHODOLOGY

The study involves a systematic analysis of the prior academic research in the area of social media marketing. Fifty-three research papers focusing on social media specifically in the marketing domain were selected. These papers were published between 2001 and 2013 in twenty-eight academic journals and thirteen conference proceedings. Out of the fifty-three papers, eleven were published between 2001 and 2006 while the remaining forty-two (81 percent) were published after 2007 in eminent journals such as *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing* and *Marketing Research*. One-third of the research papers focused on social media in general. Among the SMPs, social networking sites (SNS) were the most researched, followed closely by blogs and consumer opinion platforms. Through a chronological and platform-wise analysis, we uncover six underlying themes. We examine each theme and identify the gaps present in research. This analysis creates a background for investigation of certain crucial unanswered questions pertaining to the role of social media in marketing communications.

FINDINGS

Defining Social Media

Researchers have yet to arrive at a consensus on what constitute social media, with the definitions centered on three key elements: content, communities and Web 2.0 (Ahlqvist, Bäck, Heinonen, & Halonen, 2010). Parr (2008) highlights the efficiency of message distribution and defines social media as “the use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings in more efficient ways,” while Lewis (2010) adds the cocreation aspect and defines social media as “the current label for digital technologies that allow people to connect, interact, produce and share content.” The oft-cited definition by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) takes social media to be “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content.” For the purpose of this study, we use the term *social media* to refer to the online media, enabled by Web 2.0 technologies that allow multidirectional conversations and real-time interactions, and encompass a gamut of platforms such as SNS, blogs,

discussions forums, video sharing, content sharing, social bookmarks, podcasts and wikis. The defining characteristic of social media is the user-created personal profile page through which users connect with friends, family, acquaintances or make new connections to share information, news and experiences.

Relevance of Social Media in Marketing

Spurred by the exigencies of enhancing marketing efficiency, increasing market diversity and application of technology, the strategic focus for marketing has moved from being product-centric and segment-centric to being customer-centric and relationship driven (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000). This new relationship-based marketing paradigm requires marketers and academicians to think beyond the elements of the traditional marketing mix and consider the inclusion of interactive elements in their strategy (Grönroos, 1997).

Social media marketing (SMM) has been widely used to refer to the use of online SMPs for the purpose of marketing. Akar and Topcu (2011) have defined SMM as the “use of social media channels to promote a company and its products.” This is similar to the definition proposed by Drury (2008) where SMM is the “usage of the existing social media platforms for increasing the brand awareness among consumers on online platforms through utilization of the WOM principles.” While these definitions of SMM converge on the “promotional” aspect, they ignore the relational aspect of conversing with consumers on social media and the benefits accrued thereof.

SMM can provide several advantages to companies. In addition to enabling a free exchange of ideas and information among consumers, SMPs allow them to engage in a two-way communication with brands. This helps in reducing consumer prejudice toward brands, thereby enhancing the brand value (Kim & Ko, 2012). By participating actively in online conversations, companies can provide direction and enrich the conversation experience, making the content more meaningful and focused. This allows companies to involve their consumers more closely with brands through collaboration for marketing campaigns, and so on.

In his book *Join the Conversation*, Jaffe (2007, p. 22) highlights the significance of social media as a point of access to “a series of endlessly rich, dynamic, gratifying, robust, authentic and meaningful conversations going out there.” Unlike traditional market research techniques, social

media offers a real-time glimpse into the consumer mind by listening to consumer conversations as well as an opportunity for the consumer to provide real-time feedback (Chen, Ching, Tsai, & Kuo, 2008). Thus marketers can make changes to their marketing mix, products, services and so on, based on what is working “now” (Edelman, 2007). Precourt (2010) stresses the importance of listening, which can contribute to brand strategy and tactics, help assess competitor risk and deal with public issues, thereby increasing marketing effectiveness.

Traditional targeting techniques do not take into account the influence that the members of a segment have on the purchase decisions of others. This is largely due to the difficulty in accessing the source of interactions that shape and propagate such influence (Richardson & Domingos, 2002). Since communities are at the heart of social media, new improved techniques for targeting and segmentation can be developed from insights drawn from social media. Landry et al. (2007) observed that the age-based segmentation of a “generation” can be reduced to a shorter and more relevant period of three years by observing the social media behavior of different age groups.

To utilize SMPs as effective marketing tools, it is necessary to understand how individuals and user communities use online social interactions for different purposes (Domingos, 2005; Landry et al., 2007) and the perceptions of different SMPs (Chen et al., 2008). It is important for marketers to therefore note that each new social media has built on its predecessors and evolved in an attempt to meet a very specific purpose. The various types of SMPs are classified on the basis of their primary purpose as given in Table 2.1.

Understanding Marketing Communication on Social Media

Kim and Ko (2012) found that communication by brands on social media positively affected brand equity and relationship equity. Value equity was improved by providing novel value to consumers and an opportunity to have two-way communication with brands, while customer equity was improved by strengthening customer relationships and positively affecting purchase intent. Nevertheless, Bezjian-Avery, Calder, and Iacobucci (1998) argued that interactive media may not be necessarily superior to traditional media in all scenarios. Calder and Malthouse (2008) also suggested that advertising could be more effective when ads are experientially congruent with the media vehicle.

Table 2.1 Typology of social media platforms

<i>SMP</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Primary purpose</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Social networking sites e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn	Web-based services that allow individuals to: (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007)	Connecting with friends, family and acquaintances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User profile • Connects with people who share some form of offline tie • Egocentric • Newsfeed
Blogs e.g., blogger, Wordpress, Technorati	Personal journals on the Internet arranged in reverse chronological order that facilitate interactive computer-mediated communication through text, images, and audio/video objects (Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007)	Producing digital content with the intention of sharing it asynchronously with a conceptualized audience (Boyd, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension of the blogger in the digital world • Smaller dedicated group of users • Linking
Microblogs e.g., Twitter	Micro-blogs are online social networks where the updates or content are limited by characters	Daily chatter, sharing information or URLs and reporting news (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character limit • Hashtags • Faster, more frequent updates • Trends • “Explicit form of trust,” expressed through rating of user reviews • Availability of positive and negative opinions
Consumer opinion platforms e.g., Zomato, Tripadvisor	Virtual communities where users can post questions and comment on others’ posts related to common subjects or interests	Share experiences, knowledge, advice, ratings and reviews with other users on a common topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users can read, share and promote content
Social bookmarking sites e.g., Digg	Sites that allow users to tag online content	Classify and highlight content for personal and others’ consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users can read, share and promote content

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

<i>SMP</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Primary purpose</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Content sharing platforms e.g., Flickr, YouTube	Sites that allow users to share videos, presentations, documents, audio, pictures and other media with other users	Share content such as videos, documents, audio and photos	
Collaboration platforms e.g., Wikipedia	Sites that allow users to coordinate their efforts toward a common goal or task	Coordinate efforts toward a common goal or task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowd-sourcing

An investigation conducted by Stephen and Galak (2009) revealed that both traditional media and social media contribute value to the marketing performance in different manners and are significantly influenced by each other. While the per-event impact of traditional media was found to be greater than that of social media, SMPs contributed significantly as “information brokers,” continuously propagating information, connecting different channels, creating awareness and maintaining interest.

We propose a model offering an integrated perspective on the flows of communication through social media and traditional channels as given in Fig. 2.1.

The proposed model takes into account these multidirectional, interactive conversations from brand to consumer, and consumer to consumer. As can be seen from Fig. 2.1, social media is a channel for both consumer-generated and brand-generated messages as posited by Mangold and Faulds (2009). More importantly, the above model assimilates listening as an important aspect of the communication loop. A brand can communicate with the consumer directly through traditional media and multiple platforms on social media or indirectly through offline conversation and online interactions with other consumers. The company can use its website as a hub for its social media activities or it can connect with consumers on third-party SMPs such as Facebook and Twitter. Consumers can directly access the brand website, visit the brand page on Facebook, follow the brand on Twitter or can come across the information on a friend’s social media page or a friend can share the content with them. On the Facebook page, consumers can “like” the company’s page to get the latest updates and discounts. They might also share this information with others in their circle.

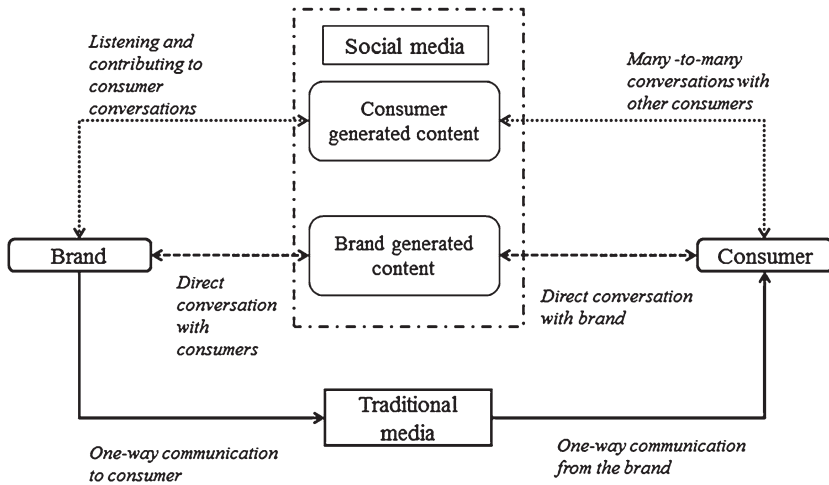


Fig. 2.1 Communication model for marketing through social media

Underlying Themes in Social Media Research

Six major themes emerge from the analysis of past social media literature (Table 2.2). These are: analysis of a specific SMP to understand its characteristics, understanding the social media users, investigating the relationship between an SMP and its users, examining the brand-consumer relationship via SMP, investigating the inter-consumer relationship on SMP and evaluating SMP as a marketing tool.

Chronological analysis of the various themes further uncovers distinct phases of the evolution of social media research. These phases are however, not mutually exclusive and tend to overlap with each other. The earlier works were primarily focused on analyzing the underlying network structure of different SNS and mining data to explore the potential for application in various fields such as viral marketing.

The second phase involved the investigation of user behavior on SMPs and their segmentation on various parameters such as usage and online activity. This was followed by exploring the relationship between the SMPs and their users and understanding user motivation for participation online. With the proliferation of social media platforms, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) became the key focus of social media research. The significant research questions included how and why consumers share product information online, what are the antecedents to online influence and how

Table 2.2 Themes in social media research

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Key focus</i>	<i>Key works</i>
SMP analysis	Definition; underlying structure; network analysis; information propagation	Domingos and Richardson (2001); Richardson and Domingos (2002); Adamic and Adar (2003); Mori, Sugiyama, and Matsuo (2005); Boyd (2006); Boyd and Ellison (2007)
SMP-consumer relationship	Community identification; interpersonal trust; two-way communication; message exchange; perceived community pressure; influence; information quality; system quality	Chen et al. (2008); Shen and Chiou (2009); Rui and Yongsheng (2010); Wang and Lin (2011)
Brand-consumer relationship via SMP	Impact of type of SMP; source credibility; product placement; impact of channel characteristics; satisfaction; commitment; attitude toward SMM; consumer engagement; brand equity	Bickart and Schindler (2001); Cha (2009); Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, and Chowdury (2009); Hsu, Liu, and Lee (2010); Akar and Topcu (2011); Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, and Pihlström (2012); Kim and Ko (2012); Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeck (2013); Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013)
Consumer-consumer relationship via SMP	Motivation for eWOM; impact of negative eWOM; social influence; value of eWOM; tie strength; homophily; trust	Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004); Hung and Li (2007); Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, and Scott (2007); Lee, Park, and Han (2008); Ermecke, Mayrhofer, and Wagner (2009); Iyengar, Han, and Gupta (2009); Karakaya and Barnes (2010); Phulari et al. (2010); Chu and Kim (2011)
SMP user analysis	Motivation for SMP participation; behavior on SMP	Matsuo, Tomobe, Hasida, and Ishizuka (2004); Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004); Domingos (2005); Huang et al. (2007); Java et al. (2007); Lerman (2007); Li (2007); Riegner (2007); Bernoff and Anderson (2010)
SMP as marketing tool	Impact of media activity on marketing outcomes	Edelman (2007); Jaffè (2007); Landry et al. (2007); Kumar et al. (2009); Mangold and Faulds (2009); Stephen and Galak (2009); Jayanti (2010); Kumar and Bhagwat (2010)

the online conversations affect consumer attitude and purchase behavior. This phase also involved researchers recognizing the potential of social media as a marketing tool which could boost or dampen the relationship between brand and consumer. Since 2006, considerable work in this area has been presented regarding application of social media in every scope of business. Recent research efforts have been directed toward social media metrics to measure quantitative returns from social media metrics.

Nearly all six themes cover the various aspects of SMM using social networking sites. Researchers have extensively investigated the social media usage of consumers and have proposed various bases for segmentation. Blogs have been the key area for researchers examining the relationship between the consumer and social media platforms and between the consumer and brands. Authors have investigated user motivation for blogging and preferences for using certain blogging platforms. Works related to application of social media are qualitative and discuss most SMPs, looking at how different SMPs can be utilized as a part of the marketers' tool kit.

Virtual communities have been around since the inception of the web, but it is only in the last decade that research in the field, from the marketing perspective, has gained popularity and momentum. Also referred to as knowledge sharing sites (Domingos, 2005; Richardson & Domingos, 2002), or forums (Hung & Li, 2007), consumer opinion platforms are one of the earliest forms of social media to capture the interest of researchers. The work by Bickart and Schindler (2001) was one of the earliest attempts to empirically gauge the impact of online conversations on consumer behavior. Some of the dimensions that were the focus of the earlier works include customer's network value (Domingos & Richardson, 2001), social trust (Matsuo et al., 2004) and social connections (Adamic & Adar, 2003; Mori et al., 2005). With the surge in popularity of MySpace and Facebook, researchers directed their attention toward SNS, focusing on impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

DISCUSSION

Marketers clearly need to master social media tools for creating a deeper connection with the consumer. To this end, researchers have explored different facets and attempted to answer questions such as

- Why should companies include social media in their marketing strategy? (Jaffe, 2007; Jayanti, 2010; Landry et al., 2007; Macnamara, 2010)
- How can companies include social media in their marketing strategy? (Edelman, 2007; Jaffe, 2007; Kumar et al., 2009; Precourt, 2010)
- Who are the consumers using social media? (Bernoff & Anderson, 2010; Li, 2007)
- What are the social media being used by the consumers? (Jaffe, 2007)
- What are the motivations of consumers for using social media? (Lerman, 2007)
- What are the implications of social media on eWOM? (Hung & Li, 2007; Smith et al., 2007)

Despite these efforts, the extant social media literature is fragmented and inconclusive regarding the role of social media in consumer behavior. Through our literature review, we identify research areas that, if investigated, can help answer these questions and substantiate the impact of communication through social media and consumer behavior.

Consumer Engagement on Social Media

Researchers have explored the relationship between different dimensions of online communications, eWOM, and consumer behavior. However, most of the research has focused on the consumer-consumer relationship rather than the brand-consumer relationship. In this context, different authors have suggested expanding the number of variables to include factors such as empathy, relevance, credibility (Bickart & Schindler, 2001); SNS features (Cha, 2009); perceived enjoyment, satisfaction, privacy and involvement (Shen & Chiou, 2009); and demographic factors (Karakaya & Barnes, 2010). Despite its ubiquity in social media literature, the conceptualization and applicability of consumer engagement in the online consumer-brand relationship has been largely overlooked. This could possibly be because of the difficulty in conceptualizing this construct in the consumer-brand relationship in general. In the last decade, consumer engagement has become a strategic priority for research (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). Researchers such as Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009), Mollen and Wilson (2010), and Parent, Plangger, and Bal (2011), have attempted to provide

a definition for consumer engagement in online settings and specifically in the context of social media but further convergence is required in conceptualizing consumer engagement on SMPs and its role in the consumer-brand relationship. Considering that specific consumer-brand interactive experiences result in different consumer engagement levels dependent on the context, we propose investigating consumer engagement as separate construct in social media research.

There is scarce empirical support for the claims of effectiveness of social media in the marketing context (Huang et al., 2007; Macnamara, 2010). The problem is accentuated by the absence of clear and standardized metrics to measure communication effectiveness through social media (Jaffe, 2007; Landry et al., 2007). Previous works assert the positive consequences of consumer engagement such as enhancing customer satisfaction, loyalty, increasing repurchase intentions and decreasing negative word of mouth (Gummerus et al., 2012), but questions related to the role of consumer engagement on social media in building consumer-brand relationships and influencing the purchase likelihood of the brand remain unanswered. Multiple studies (Akar & Topcu, 2011; Iyengar et al., 2009; Stephen & Galak, 2009) have explored the linkage between social media activity and consumer behavior, but these studies did not consider consumer engagement as a *separate dimension*. Even the traditional response hierarchy models that explain passive communication fail to take active consumer engagement into consideration. Bowden (2009) posits engagement as a distinct entity within the broader engagement process, which is different from other relational constructs such as involvement, commitment, loyalty, and participation, as it takes into account interactive consumer experiences in a comprehensive manner. Calder et al. (2009) argue that most works seem to confuse engagement with the outcomes of engagement, due to the unclear meaning of engagement. Brodie et al. (2011) further state that “involvement” and “participation” are antecedents to consumer engagement. However, given the iterative nature of the engagement process, they need not be strictly antecedents and can coexist or even be engagement consequences. In light of the ambiguity in the academic literature, we suggest future research into consumer engagement on social media, its antecedents and outcomes.

Consumer Preferences and Perceptions of Different Social Media Platforms

Do consumers differentiate in their perception of the various SMPs? If yes, what are the underlying attributes of these differences? Interestingly, the findings of Akar and Topcu (2011) suggest that consumers with higher frequency usage of Facebook and YouTube have a positive influence on the attitude toward marketing with social media. This could indicate that the choice of social media websites is an influencing factor in social media marketing. While it is evident from the typology (Table 2.1) developed earlier that SMPs have different characteristics, the distinguishing attributes from the consumer viewpoint are yet to be researched. By understanding the similarities and dissimilarities between SMPs, researchers can develop insights into the unique positioning of each SMP, which could lead to a targeted and effective SMM strategy design. Therefore, we propose examining the existing SMPs to assess their impact on consumer buying decisions.

Profile of Consumers Engaging with Brands on Social Media

From the literature review, it is evident that many researchers have attempted to categorize Internet users according to different characteristics, such as their purchase behavior (Iyengar et al., 2009; Riegner, 2007) or social media usage (Bernoff & Anderson, 2010; Java et al., 2007; Li, 2007). However, most of the categorization is limited in scope to specific platforms such as microblogging (Java et al., 2007) or social networking (Iyengar et al., 2009). It is important to understand the characteristics of the social media users who are willing to connect and interact with brands on social media platforms. Marketers are still unable to identify the influencers in social networks and online communities (Riegner, 2007; Smith et al., 2007). Therefore, the exploration of social media users must be extended to identifying the social media users who are interacting with brands and companies on social media. Finally, there is also the need to understand the user profile and social media usage patterns of users, especially outside the USA and Europe (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Macnamara, 2010). There are hardly any studies analyzing and categorizing Indian social media users.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study was guided by the need for a holistic view of SMM from the communication perspective. It provides a systematic analysis of the current academic literature on social media and successfully identifies the underlying themes in the existing research. With the retrospective analysis concluded, this study identifies three key research areas that will allow future research to proceed with a firmer footing. The research highlights the potential of using social media for building a brand-consumer relationship and leveraging both online and offline interactions to influence consumer behavior. The research highlights the importance of understanding the profile of social media consumers and their online behavior patterns. The study also suggests evaluating consumer engagement as a key factor in increasing the effectiveness of marketing communication through social media.

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