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The Future of Technology in Marketing; Utopia or Dystopia?

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Our special issue attracted a lot of attention! The big question is did it answer the question; utopia or dystopia? Take a look for yourself. Across two issues, we present papers on the latest trends in marketing technology, from artificial intelligence (AI), to data mining, to influencers, to smart retailing. We also present papers on engagement, positive and negative, and the psychological impacts of technology in higher education. Into the second issue, we start with a piece on, not just publish or perish, but also the need to promote. We present papers with a more international context, and finish with concerns around privacy and justice.

We begin with a piece on AI. This is appropriate given the title of our special issue, which sought to explore whether the future of technology in marketing would be utopian or dystopian. Kate Letheren and her team talk about AI and robotics in terms of black, white or grey magic. Grey magic means a bit of both, and their commentary provides a concrete set of 24 research questions to lay out an agenda for future research in this field, in marketing power, understanding the bias, and ethics revisited.

Dries Benoit, Stefan Lessmann and Wouter Verbeke zoom in on realizing the utopian potential of big data analytics in the field of marketing. In their commentary, the experts contextualize first the field of big data analytics. Further, they discuss the value of big data analytics from the perspective of the firm and the customer. They take then a critical look on the impediments of crunching customer data for marketing purposes. After having read this article, academic scholars and practitioners will clearly see that big data analytics has challenges, but even more great opportunities for companies to create value and build a competitive advantage.

In the first regular paper of our special issue, Kay and colleagues examine the effect of macro and micro-influencers and their disclosure of native advertising sponsorship on consumer evaluations of products. Their paper is titled “When less is more: The impact of macro and micro social media influencers’ disclosure”. They establish that consumers exposed to the micro-influencer condition reported higher levels of product knowledge while those exposed to the disclosure condition reported the products to be more attractive. Findings of this study also show that when exposed to micro-influencers who disclose, consumers have higher levels of purchase intentions than when exposed to macro-influencers who do not disclose. When sponsorship is not disclosed by the influencers, purchase intentions are found

to be the lowest. This research discusses which level of social media influencer provides superior outcomes for product knowledge, product attractiveness and purchase intentions. From a policy viewpoint, it also proves the effectiveness of mandatory disclosure of native advertising regulations by demonstrating how it influences the persuasive effects of social media influencers.

Still on influencers, Reinikainen and her colleagues examine the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing in their paper titled “‘You really are a great big sister’ – parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing”. This work focuses on YouTubers, with results indicating that a parasocial relationship with the influencer builds the perceived credibility of the influencer, while comments by other audience members moderate the effect. Influencer credibility then positively affects brand trust and purchase intention.

Sanjit Roy and colleagues move us away from influencer marketing to explore the factors that influence customer adoption of in-store smart technologies in a retail setting. Their paper is titled “Consumer-Computer Interaction and In-Store Smart Technology (IST) in the Retail Industry: The Role of Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability”. They use the motivation, opportunity, and ability framework to examine the role of an impressive range of factors in a customer’s perception of shopping effectiveness; namely relative advantage, perceived complexity, flow experience, enjoyment, retailer support, perceived attractiveness, technology readiness, and self-efficacy. Their sample size of 747 across Australian and Indian consumers adds credibility to their findings.

Pöyry and colleagues move us to a B2B setting in their paper titled, “Engaged, but with what? Objects of engagement in technology-aided B2B customer interactions”, examine technology as an object of engagement. Prior studies on engagement objects have studied numerous foci, however, this paper is novel in that a specific technology is itself proposed as the object of engagement. As the authors claim, this is the first study to scrutinize the objects of engagement when using a new marketing technology – specifically, VR technology – in B2B customer interactions. Interesting from a theoretical perspective is their suggestion of a central and peripheral logic regarding the objects of engagement, and also the identification of factors that trigger engagement with those objects. The authors argue that customer engagement is not only dependent on what the customer sees or does, for example, but also to what those brand interactions make the customer focus their attention. This research also contributes by integrating the marketing perspective on customer engagement with the information-systems perspective. While the SD logic-based view on customer engagement underlines the customer’s motivation to invest resources in brand interactions, this study highlights that the objects of those investments are not necessarily the brand itself but the service provided or the technology used. This paper addresses the scope of the call for papers in this special issue by combining a novel and innovative technology as a focal object in the context of a popular research topic in marketing; that of customer engagement.

Azer and Alexander is one of the few who look at the dystopian side of the future of technology in marketing, in their paper titled, “Negative Customer Engagement Behavior: The Interplay of Intensity and Valence in Online Networks”. They examine how the relatively understudied negative form of engagement behavior operates in a popular technology platform environment; that of online review sites. This paper empirically investigates the impact of six distinct forms of negatively valenced influencing behavior (NVIB). The results provide new insights into different intensity levels of NVIB and how they are moderated by the number of positive reviews. Practically, this paper addresses one of the challenges for service providers in managing NVIBs, centered on understanding the heterogeneity of its forms, and hence their different intensity levels. The results suggest that service providers use semantic tools to detect the intensity levels of NVIB and to prioritize handling and/or mitigating the more intense NVIBs when they occur. The empirical validation of the forms of NVIB is an interesting contribution. This paper addresses the scope of the call for papers in this special issue by combining a contemporary technology platform; that of review sites, as the context in addressing an important research topic in marketing; that of negative customer engagement.

We finish off the first part of our special issue with an important piece by Daisy Lee and her colleagues on psychological well-being in a higher education setting. It is titled “The impact of university brand identification and eWOM behaviour

on students' psychological well-being: A multi-group analysis among active and passive social media users". They found that students who share positive reviews about school on social media tend to have better psychological health. This study also revealed that active social media users benefit more in terms of well-being through sharing positive online reviews about their universities.

The second part of our special issue starts with a commentary on how academics can use social media to promote their personal brand. D'Alessandro and colleagues explore some of the reputational issues of using academic social networking sites (ASNS) such as ResearchGate, ResearcherID, ORCID, Academia.edu, Google Scholar, and Mendeley for academic self-promotion and considers whether the adage of "Publish or Perish" has been recently overshadowed by the new imperative of "Promote or Perish?". They ultimately conclude their piece with some useful advice, for academics junior and senior. Specifically, downloads and readerships help drive citation rates, and provide evidence of research impact.; and metrics from social networking sites are becoming more important in obtaining research grants.

In their commentary called 'Dystopia and Utopia in Digital Services', Charles Hofacker and Daniela Corsaro examine a series of Hegelian opposites regarding digital services between a utopian technological outcome and a dystopian result. They discuss truth versus lies, long term versus short term, fairness versus unfairness, human versus machines, return versus risk, coordination versus competition and slow versus fast. The authors predict that, in the future, new technologies will continue to emerge and to be used by marketers to achieve their goals. Marketing actions supported by such technologies will continue to produce those paradoxical results, leading to new managerial and academic challenges.

Wiese and colleagues in their paper titled "Only Determining perceptions, attitudes and behavior towards social network site advertising in a three-country context" explore the beneficial impact of social network site advertising in a three-country context. Social networking sites are important online platforms that foster communication, sharing and collaboration across the globe. This study looks at Facebook and investigates whether personal and societal perceptions and trust in Facebook have an impact on attitudes towards Facebook's advertising. The authors zoom in on the privacy concerns and investigate whether it has a moderating influence. The authors use an online survey of 1,166 respondents and collect data in three countries: Australia, Germany and South Africa.

Continuing the international focus, Chau and colleagues investigate the adoption drivers of mobile commerce or m-commerce in developing countries. Their paper is titled "Critical determinants for mobile commerce adoption in Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises". Their study is contextualized for the Vietnamese SME market. They show that perceived benefits, perceived compatibility, perceived security, organizational readiness, organizational innovativeness, customer pressures, government support, and managers' IT knowledge are the critical determinants of m-commerce adoption. They rely on 513 Vietnamese SMEs and use structural equation modelling to analyse their data.

Wongkitrungrueng and colleagues, in their paper titled, "Live Streaming Commerce from the Sellers' Perspective: Implications for Online Relationship Marketing", investigate the seller's perspective of live streaming as a channel for direct selling. As the authors note, live streaming has recently become a popular direct selling channel for small, self-employed sellers. While the extant research focused on consumer motivation and intention to shop via live streaming, little is known from the seller's perspective. This research fills that gap. A strength of this study is the use of a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. The research identifies four sales approaches and twelve strategies adopted in acquiring and retaining customers. This typology of sales approach representing seller-focused antecedents is mapped against relationship process and outcomes to provide a framework for understanding relationship mechanisms in live streaming commerce. This paper also addresses the scope of the call for papers in this special issue by combining a novel and innovative technology platform for direct selling, specifically livestreaming as a focal object in the context of a popular research topic in marketing; that of customer engagement.

The issue of consumer privacy could be raised in almost every paper introduced thus far. It is appropriate therefore that Pomfret and colleagues tackle it in their work, which looks at the socio-demographic and attitudinal influences on privacy and disclosure choices. Through a choice experiment and measures adapted from Communication Privacy Management theory, they contextualise privacy as a negotiation about accessibility over contextual boundaries. They find that individuals' social media disclosure decisions are influenced, at least in part, by their privacy attitudes, particularly with respect to information categories which may cue other personal information. They also cover how consumers may be willing to pay for privacy going forward, which has implications for alternative revenue streams not built on consumer surveillance.

Finally, Leclercq and colleagues make a valuable contribution to this special issue with their paper titled "When Gamification Backfires: The Impact of Perceived Justice on Online Community Contributions". The authors investigate the impact of gamification on online community behaviour. In particular, with three experiments, they investigate the feeling of justice on the reward policy associated with gamification. They find that while high in-gamification perceived procedural justice acts as a necessary prerequisite for member contributions in the community, high distributive justice can reduce game-related uncertainty, thereby rendering gamified practices less fun, particularly for low-engaged community members that tend to value rewards.

In all, this special issue has attracted a range of papers investigating a range of topics, making conclusions that make the future of technology in marketing look mostly utopian. However, is that for marketers or consumers? The papers that have investigated the consumer perspective have cautioned around privacy, justice, and psychological well-being. As marketers, no matter the benefits that big data, AI, smart technologies, or influencers bring, we must be conscious of our responsibility to the consumer. That is a person on the other side of the screen, operating in a social, not a selling, space.