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UNCOVERING ETHICAL ISSUES ON DIGITAL MARKETING: A REVIEW AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Muhammad Sani Gawuna, Ph.D

Department of Management Science Nigeria Police Academy, Wudil Kano

Abstract

The proliferation of information and communication technologies that led to the emergence of digital marketing has transformed the way businesses are conducted. This brings huge opportunities and benefits to both consumers and organizations. Thus, for organizations to remain competitive, they are expected to exploit this marketing practice. However, despite the myriad of benefits associated with digital marketing, it is equally surrounded with some challenges and evolving trends. Informed by communication privacy management (CPM) theory and psychological reactance theory, the article aimed at examining the hurdles along with some emerging issues surrounding the concept. Knowing them in depth will aid companies to be proactive and develop effective digital marketing strategies that will aid them to achieve their goals. Secondary sources of data have being employed in the study. Various recommendations were offered to organizations and other industry experts. Equally, suggestions for upcoming studies were offered.

Key words; Digital Marketing, DM, Privacy Concerns, Trust

Introduction

The advancement and proliferation of information and communication technology in today's contemporary business settings make digital marketing operation inevitable. Thus, several opportunities that drive businesses are created as a result of this paradigm shift, one of which is the deviation from the traditional marketing practices to a more robust digital marketing method. The emergence of social networking for example, facilitates smooth communication between organizations and the existing or potential customers. Also, customers can easily be influenced positively. Similarly, DM is now considered as the most popular medium that encourages smooth mass communication that can easily be assessed anywhere and can handle large volume of customer information at a much higher speed. In effect, it allows organizations to build effective and personalized customer relationship.

Despite numerous benefits associated with digital communication, it is not without some challenges. These include dearth of empathy, absent of eye contact, lack of personal touch among others (Slijepčević, Radojević, & Perić, 2020). Also, the prevailing usage of digital technologies is believed to be jeopardizing the current business models (Leeftang et al (2014). They further argued that, the emergence of digital era led organizations to heavily rely on data and other 'hard facts' which greatly hinders creativity and innovation. In addition, organizations are facing a hideous task of controlling their content which is an important form of DM. It is considered as one of the challenging issues that determine the success of DM operations as argued by Grubor and Jakša (2018) who maintained that it is an influential means through which customer engagement is achieved, and yields to the creation of meaningful relationships between the organization and the buyers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to deliberate on the

challenges along with some emerging trends and issues related to DM.

Literature Review

The concept of Digital Marketing

Scholars believed that DM represents the application of information and communication technologies to meet the requirements of the customers (Veleva & Tsvetanova 2020). Thus, it is a means through which organizations achieve their marketing objectives by applying digital technologies. In this regard, effective DM practices enhance customer relationship management. Put differently, DM denotes using any digital technology to facilitate the marketing process, with the end goal of facilitating customer interaction and engagement. Ng and Wakenshaw (2017) offered a comprehensive definition of DM as “the application of data, ICT-based technology (e.g., artificial intelligence), platforms (e.g. social networks), media and devices to extend the scope of marketing within both physical and virtual spaces, for the purpose of improving customer relationships by empowering, informing, influencing, and engaging consumers”. Scholars believed that the scope of DM is not only restricted to the online or e-marketing. That is why Grubor and Jakša (2018) posited that DM encompasses not only online marketing activities as it also involves offline marketing practices in the form of SMS marketing, the use of smart TV to advertise a product or services, and it can even be in form of digital print ads.

According to Veleva, and Tsvetanova (2020) application proper implementation of DM makes organizations to be more flexible to external environmental changes thereby enhancing effective customer relationship management and by extension responsive to the needs of the customers. It encourages smooth interactive communication with the clients; it reduces geographical barriers as it encourages real time businesses with anyone across the globe. It also encourages prompt response on customers’ queries and offers flexibility which helps towards identification and meeting their needs. It provides opportunity for the effective segmentation and targeting of customers. It also helps organizations to personalize their advertising and other marketing tactics. DM is usually cost efficient, and is

assumed to be more profitable. It also offers small and medium sized firms the chance to compete effectively in the market. Jayashree (2023) while highlighting the benefits of DM affirmed that it helps towards enhancing the awareness of a brand, creating customer engagement through campaigns and web content creation, as well as its cost advantage tendency as social media and other internet platforms are assumed to be free.

Apart from several advantages offered by DM which is the application of information and communication technologies for the implementation of marketing practices in order to better satisfy the needs and wants of the customers, it also associated with some disadvantages. Veleva, and Tsvetanova (2020) enumerated such disadvantages as;

- i. DM can easily be imitated by competitors as it makes firms to be an ‘open book’ to their rivals. For instance logos, corporate identities or even trademarks can be plagiarized to mislead and manipulate customers through false information about competitors’ products/services or brands. This can be detrimental to organizational image and that may lead to customer dissatisfaction.
- ii. If poorly and unprofessionally designed, and targeted to the wrong customers, DM will not achieve the anticipated goal
- iii. Consumers can be irritated by information overload in the form of excessive advertising messages or disruption of video posts. This might lead to negative attitudes towards organizational offerings by the customers.
- iv. Negative feedback in form of bad comments about organizational offerings or its brand can jeopardize the reputation of a firm. Since almost all the users of the internet have an online access to the organization and its trademark.

In furtherance of the above, Lesidrenska, and Dicke (2012) added that, organizations need to be extra careful with what and how they connect with the customer. Organizational failures to promptly react to the negative word of mouth about their offerings may be a great challenge to them. Customers can be annoyed with wide range of Ads and Spam will have a negative effect on the organizational image. Equally, organizations are faced

with a hideous task of controlling their content. As it one of the challenging issue that determines the success of DM operations as argued by Grubor and Jakša (2018) who maintained that it is an influential means through which customer engagement is achieved, and this yields to the creation of meaningful relationships between the organization and the buyers.

Emerging issues on Digital Marketing

Despite the advancement of knowledge prevailing in today's dynamic era, most organizations especially those operating in the under developed and developing countries are struggling to keep up with the intensity and dynamism of digital practices. In fact, that's why de Ruyter, Keeling, and Viet (2018) affirmed that only few organizations believed that their existing business models can survive the persistent and flexible needs or demands of the market which is being digitized at a much higher speed.

The limitations and risks associated with digital marketing is also determined by the advancement in terms of level development of a given country. This according to James et al (2009) will to a large extent be determined by the 'connection costs, unavailability of secured online payment methods, connection speeds, availability of local content, limited credit card availability and its usage, logistical barriers with respect to the delivery and fulfilment of products, availability of own-language websites, etc.' (James et al 2009). These factors were summarized by Gregorio et al (2005) into six determinants of online marketing as; language capabilities, internet infrastructure, computer infrastructure, logistical infrastructure, literacy level as well as the affordability of the services. They argued that these factors served as restraints not only do the developing economies, but also to the developed markets.

The availability of excessive information referred to as 'information overload' a times serves as nuisance to the customers. While scholars in the field of psychology and organizational science maintained that human beings possess narrowed information processing tendency (Logan et al (2018), and when the information surpasses human capacity, their performances are bound to reduce (Hunter 2004). In fact, we are now operating in an era

of information overload which denotes to a situation where information is in excess in such way that an individual cannot assimilate or process within a stated period of time.

Thus, in view of the outbursts of information some of which are even unsolicited, users are now becoming selective with respect to media exposure and engagement (Greenfield 2017), hence the need for enhanced privacy among the users as most of them do not want their daily activities to be publically exposed to others. In fact, the persistent media exposure as reported by Technopedia (2011) lead "users to have a tendency to back away from social media usage when they become overwhelmed with too many sites, too many pieces of content, too many friends and contacts, and too much time spent keeping up with these connections".

Similarly, complex messages cannot be easily understood in a situation where there is vast amount of information. Also, studies have found that the presence of overwhelming amount of information will lead people to make use of their sensory filters to select the information they perceived to be important to them as it is very difficult to consider all the available information at their disposal (Hill & Moran 2011). Equally, a connection between text messages along with instant messages with symptoms of depression elements of social anxiety has been established by Becker, Alzahabi, and Hopwood (2013) among university undergraduates

Another issue worth mentioning with respect to DM is that of making customers to be more empowered, that is making them to be more informed, give them some room to express their views about organizational offerings with regard to what they think and want. This will lead to a scenario where the company can be more exposed, as customers may demand what the organization might have not planned for or could not provide (Peppers, 2011).

Another dark side of DM is that it gives more emphasis on the younger segments of the customers neglecting the older segments who are more promising. Majority of our youths are addicted to the internet and social media in particular which sometimes have negative effect on their behaviors. For instance, the outcome of a study

conducted by Gregorio, Kassicieh, and Neto, (2005) in Maryland of the United States of America revealed that symptoms that resemble to drug addictions were observed on students who were directed not use social media for just one day. In addition, the online price comparison models are preventing organizations to derive optimal prices for their offerings (Leeflang et al (2014). They also added that, the effectiveness of DM is difficult to measure compared to the traditional practices where the metrics are more comparable.

Similarly, one of the major drawbacks associated with an emerging digital communication is the dearth of fundamental components of personal connection like empathy, eye contact and personal interaction. Similarly, the addiction with digital along with social media is considered by some as a disease prevalent in the 'new normal' era. In addition, there is absent of absolute secrecy as far as the internet or social media is concerned. This usually leads to a serious trust issue which according to Jacobson, Gruzd, and Hernández-García, (2020) believed that people normally express great concerns regarding their usage of social media, specifically by third parties.

The proliferation and wide availability of data through social media and other internet and digital sources pose serious threat with respect to privacy and other ethical considerations (Ward 2018; Jacobson et al 2020). The explosion of scammers in today's digitized era is of great concern to many. Large amount of data are used by to spy users' account, steal their identities and even scam them. In particular, consumers' trust on social media is believed to be eroding. Thus, consumers are believed to be worried regarding the privacy of their data leading to distrust which eventually is conveyed to the organizations thereby leading to dissatisfaction and disloyalty to the affected brands. In effect, privacy concerns among customers are on the increase today. As such, some consumers are labelling some brands and social media negatively (Appel et al, 2020), to the extent that some are even deleting their social media presence as a result of the fears that their personal data can be abused.

The internet and particularly social media is being employed by politicians to mobilize, attract and retain electorates and many are using any tactics such as fake news, increased polarization to achieve their goals. In fact, the digital sectors are also now becoming an avenue where political parties are using to disseminate their political agenda. This is in agreement with Edelman, (2018) who posited that social media is characterized with some unethical behaviours ranging from hate speech, fake news or inappropriate content.

There is paucity of studies concerning unethical behaviors of organizations or harmful effect of digital media to the customers. If one observe the extent of marketing content misleading customers or large number of unnecessary notifications disturbing the users (Slijepcevic & (Radojevic, 2018). As consumers' data are frequently tracked, the issue of security of their privacy is assumed to be compromised. This will have an effect on consumers' trust which is an important area of interest in the scholarly marketing arena (Veleva & Tsvetanova 2020). The concerns about consumers' online privacy are linked with adopting privacy protective measures, for instance, getting rid of users' personal information away from commercial databases, removing cookies and desisting from self-disclosure (Baruh, Secinti, & Cemalcilar 2017).

The marketing and other related departments are experiencing talent gap, specifically with respect to those with the analytical capabilities. The pervasiveness of marketing practices within the organizations is posing some challenges to them. This emerges in the form of role ambiguity along with imprecise accountability and incentives (Leeflang et al (2014). As argued by Slijepcevic and Radojevic (2018), prior to the emergence of internet and other social media platforms, managers had ample time to systematically and methodologically observe and scan their social environment and study how it behaves. However, the reverse is now the case, as that luxury ceases. Hence, there is a greater need for managers to predict and act promptly to the current emerging realities.

In addition, Kapoor (2023) is of the belief that another major obstacle with respect to making purchase using digital media specifically in the developing countries is that of challenges connected with cross-border operations, threats of inferior quality products, spurious and counterfeits products, predatory prices as well as unfair and other manipulative trade practices.

Another issue worth deliberating is that labor rules as it relates to the digital arena. As required by ILO (2015), for instance, 'crowdwork' executed online through web-based platforms should not be done by child labor, compensation should be uniform rather than discriminatory. Although the OECD has itemized three conflicting policy goals in the context of digital environment which are; protecting the consumers and their privacy, ensuring open access to internet as well as ensuring market competition (Koske et al., 2014). Yet, digital workers' right is generally absent even in the US trade policy as reported by Velut, (2023). This emphasizes that there is disconnect amongst digital trade and labor rights.

The persistence use of online game is also a serious concern particularly to the youths and children, as it creates what the American Psychiatric Association refereed to gaming disorder. This according to Phillips (2015) is also among the negative effect of social media, and by extension the internet. Furthermore, Cyberbullying is also among the problems facing online communities. It is associated with some problems that range from stolen identity, gossiping, showing nasty pictures, abusive comments, threats and blackmails (Roblek, et al 2013). It is also reflected as hate tags which greatly lead to dissatisfaction on some brands in the form of negative reactions by the users.

Empirical Review

Boerman and Smit (2023)'s work aimed at enhancing the body of knowledge through conducting a study relating to consumer privacy in the area of advertising. Having systematically reviewing the extant literature from the International Journal of Advertising (IJA). Specifically, 84 IJA publications had tackle privacy issues in the context of advertising researches. The study also found that privacy is linked with various advertising

formats and had been address in three basic ways. That is, in the context of ethics and regulations; in relation to personal traits that differentiates the types of consumers; as well as description of advertisement responses and their effects.

Having observed paucity of professional norms that regulate social media usage in the context of marketing, along with the identification of a gap that will help in understanding consumers' comfort on how the marketers make use of their social media data, Jacobson, Gruz, and Hernández-García, (2020) conducted a study that employed a sample of 751 adults who are online to examine users' perceptions on social media data usage for marketing purposes. The finding of the empirical study showed that the users' perceived risks and benefits of making use of social media had a connection with their comfort on how the marketers made use of publically accessible social media data. The authors succeeded in coming up with an emerging marketing construct in the context of DM, which they denote as the amount of comfort derived by an individual with information targeted to all on social media for the purpose of advertising, customer relationship and opinion mining.

The study of Logan, Bright and Grau (2018) aimed at investigating how users of social media cope with the fatigue associated with its usage and to have an understanding on its impacts on brand in the context of the United States of America. The authors denote social media fatigue to mean the ability of customers to lose interest on social media usage due to information overload and other security or privacy concerns. Drawing from Rational Choice Theory, increased privacy concerns has a positive effect on social media fatigue. However, the benefits of users' continued usage of social media are greater than usage discontinuance by the consumers.

The work of Slijepcevic and Radojevic, (2018) reviewed extant literature on digital communication, digital marketing and digital communication and predicted how digital environment will likely be in the future considering the dynamism and complexity of the digital environment. Similarly, Grubor and Jakša (2018) studied

buyers' behavior on internet usage, emerging models for the interaction and communication among buyers as well as examining the various opportunities and possible hurdles (risks) faced by modern organization in the contemporary digital setting with the aim of understanding customers' online behaviors so that effective marketing strategies can be created.

Baruh, Secinti and Cemalcilar (2017)'s meta analytic work examined consumers' privacy concerns and literacy as determinants online service social network sites (SNSs) usage, information sharing along with the privacy protective adoption measures. The study analysed 166 prior studies from 34 different countries. In agreement with the privacy paradox doctrine, and underpinned by communication privacy management (CPM) theory, the finding of the study indicated that privacy concerns was not a predictor of SNS usage. Nonetheless, those alarmed with privacy, were found to be less likely to use the online platforms and share their information and more concerned to use privacy protective measures. With the exclusion of information sharing, the connections were also found to predict intentions and users' behavior. In addition, it was also revealed that privacy literacy played a vital role towards enhancing the usage of privacy protective means.

Mosteller, and Poddar (2017) investigated an empirical study involving American consumers aged between 18 to 64 years on the the four main factors on customers' digital engagement with online privacy protection behaviors. Drawing from social exchange theory, regulatory focus along with marketing relationship theories to develop the theoretical model of the study. The study found that privacy violation experience and consumers' perceived secondary control of their personal information are the major antecedents, while privacy concerns along with consumers' trust in social media websites served as a mediating variable in the relationship.

The study of Gregorio, Kassicieh, and Neto (2005) with the sole objective of examining the predictors of e-business in the developed countries. Using a sample of 52 emerging markets and 26 developed economies, the outcome of their empirical work showed that e-readiness

is a predictor of e-business activity that includes internet and computer infrastructure, low cost telephone service, logistic infrastructure, literacy level as well as English language capabilities. The result did not find a connection between e- business with institutional variables (such as; country risk, transparency as well as economic freedom) or payment infrastructure. The study also indicated a global digital divide among countries, and also found that country's e-business activity is a consequent of information and communication infrastructural development of a country along with its logistics and human capital advancement.

Theoretical Framework

Although there is no agreement on the parts of theorists and philosophers with respect to what why privacy is important and what exactly it protects, scholars believed that privacy is an important issue considering the level of interests it safeguards (Adams & Almahmoud 2023). It has been proven to have had an effect on the social life of human beings in profound and subtle manners. For example, according to Benn and Gaus (1986), privacy has an important influence towards regulating institutions, practices, activities as well as general social and individual lives. This is also in agreement with other theorists such as Rachels, (1975) and Fried (2013) who maintained that privacy norms develop and regulate social, family and professional linkages and also enhance and encourage such interactions. In effect, Solove (2008) affirmed that any society that lacks privacy is synonymous to the suffocating one.

Thus, the study is informed by communication privacy management theory (CPM) along with the psychological reactance theory. The CPM is the theory that gives emphasis on the decision making process of individuals and groups with respect to their privacy (Petronio, 2002). The theory postulates that privacy should be considered to be mediation between accessibility and retreat rather than creating a maximum boundary so that one can be completely out of reach (Baruh, Secinti & Cemalcilar 2017). Thus, privacy management should be strictly observed by the users of DM apparatus. As it involves a dynamic process where people use strategies referred to privacy rules in order to control such boundaries. Thus, proponents of this theory believed that

the discrepancy that exists between privacy concerns and users' behavior might be that the perceived risks to privacy should be less than the benefits to be derived from sharing. In effect the theory holds that information sharing along with privacy protective measures adoption serve as complementary mechanisms of privacy management. Hence, according to Cemalcilar, & Baruh, (2016) as people share more information, they are expected to adopt some measures capable of reducing the spread of such information.

As argued by Petronio's (2002), consumers normally regulate information they perceive as private. According to the postulation of CPM theory, people set their own rules regarding their privacy by calculating the risks and benefits associated with information disclosure. The theory further asserts that being a contentious concept privacy management the need for people to disclose their private information in order to realize their needs and social functions and at the same time concealing such information to maintain their protection (Baruh, Secinti & Cemalcilar (2017). Interestingly, researchers have been using the CPM theory in their studies related to the social media context (for instance, Cavusoglu et al., 2016; DeGroot and Vik, 2017).

On the other hand, the Psychological reactance theory (Brehm 1966, 1989) states that people feel disturbed as a result of perceived threat to their freedom (Brehm 1989). Thus, they are expected to adjust their behaviors and attitudes to regain such freedom (Baek and Morimoto 2012). Consumers can maintain their freedom through controlling their personal information in order to achieved perceived autonomy. In effect, according to Baek and Morimoto (2012) people can react negatively to the organizations or their offerings when their freedom is infringed.

Methodology

The study made use of secondary data mainly from various literature sources obtained from both anecdotal and empirical studies along with text books sources. Specifically, digital marketing related literature obtained from several scholarly articles, text books as well as other internet sources from several contexts and settings were critically considered.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Presently, most organizations whether profit or not-profit, are saddled with the enormous tasks of being proactive and keeping up with the perpetual innovations and changes in the digital technology domain. Thus, they are expected to be more visible and directly connected to their target customers for them to effectively survive in today's dynamic world. They equally need to fully comprehend the digital environment and are also expected to be proactive in using digital tools for them to succeed. As their level of acceptance and application of innovative digital marketing practices will greatly determine their level of success. They are expected to envisage and act promptly to the emerging trends by continuously engaging and reacting with the requirements of their target customers (Slijepčević, Radojević, & Perić, 2020).

In particular, organizations need to know the limitations along with the potential risks associated with digital marketing implementation. The concept of privacy concerns which signifies peoples' beliefs with respect to the risks and possible negative repercussions related to the information sharing should be accorded the much needed priority by organizations. The need for organizational brands to embrace consumer an open consumer-centric privacy policy practices had been advocated by OPC, 2018. This will lead to the maximum reaping of the benefits offered digital marketing. Prince (2018) added that people need to be empowered with high level control mechanism regarding the information they intend to share, to whom, and the purpose of sending such information.

The issue of ethics in marketing is no longer a new phenomenon. However, today marketers are saddled with a more complex ethical situation that requires enhanced technical and ethical knowledge (Jacobson, 2020). Understanding the ethical norms and the factors that address or reduce ethical sensitivity become imperative. This can be achieved by users' socialization and the ability for them to be comfortable with digital practices. The author called for the integration of the consumers' ethical consideration concerns into the organizational marketing practices. Organizations have

to pay adequate attention to the norms of the people. This will ensure consumers' trust and confidence capable of ensuring long-term relationship between the organizations and users.

Factors responsible for eroding customer trust have to be embraced, which according to Appel, et al (2020) include concerns regarding consumers' personal information, information security as well as intellectual property. This according to them will lead to enhanced transparency and trust.

Organizations or social media platforms should be held responsible for their actions of exposing consumer data for them to feel safe and be in control (for instance, the General Data Protection Regulation - GDPR) as applied by the European Union). Organizations should also imbibe policies concerning consumer data that are transparent and are in agreement with the established laws, advertising restrictions and are in conformity with peoples' right to privacy.

Generally, users of digital appliances do not have absolute control of their personal information. Hence, some of them do not trust the platforms and organizations handling their data. In this regard, Boerman and Smit (2023) advocated that organizations should have a thorough knowledge on how consumer privacy cynicism evolves as well as how this affects their trust and advertisement end product. They further recommended that prior studies need to examine how organizations handle consumer privacy issues, moderate privacy cynicism and enhance trust. Increased transparency will to a large extent assist in addressing these issues as documented by (Helberger et al. 2020).

The need to conduct several studies on the emerging issues trending in digital context specifically in various cultures and settings had been well advocated by scholars (Ali, et al 2016; Alalwan et al, 2016). Moreover, regulations are believed to be context-specific, as it varies from one country to another, and sometimes even from state to state. Hence, the need for organizations to have deep knowledge of data usage along with consumer protection and security of a given

country equally becomes necessary. As required by ILO (2015), 'crowdwork' executed online through web-based platforms should not be done by child labor, compensation should also be uniform rather than discriminatory.

The introduction of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe which creates privacy awareness among organizations and their customers should be imitated by all countries or organizations around the globe irrespective of their size. Attempt should also be made by consumers to limit their self-disclosures, by desisting from posting personal information. In addition, Stephen (2016) recommends that researchers should consider emerging important topics, particularly consumer privacy issues in the context of digital marketing and social media.

Organizations should have to make sure that strict measures are put in place to ensure online ethical procedures are rigorously maintained just as what it obtainable in the offline context. This will have a great effect towards boosting their image and ensure customer satisfaction, and by extension loyalty. Upcoming studies are also encouraged to pay attention to harmful effect on digital media. Tucker (2014) added that a thorough and comprehensive understanding of how consumers think about their privacy and what they want to do to protect it as well as how they value (or devalue) digital media services that protect (or not) privacy is still needed. This will give the organizations comprehensive picture of the consumers' privacy issues or concerns so that effective digital marketing strategy can be employed.

On their part, people should redouble their effort towards addressing their privacy concerns by imbibing online privacy management. Government also needs to ensure that effective privacy regulations are established and enforced. In addition children's privacy and protection law need to also be in existence to get rid of the sites that are showcasing pornographic pictures and videos, fake news, and other undesirable content.

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