

Two Decades of Digital Marketing Research: From Web-Based Consumer Influence to AI-Mediated Marketing Decisions

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Abstract: The past two decades have witnessed a profound transformation of digital marketing, both as a managerial practice and as a field of academic inquiry. This paper offers a narrative review of this transformation, organized around four overlapping eras: the web infrastructure era of the early 2010s, in which the operational foundations of digital marketing capabilities were established; the social analytics era of the mid-2010s, in which monitoring tools, search-based AI applications and the systematic study of online consumer influence emerged; the maturation era of the late 2010s and the pandemic shock of 2020-2022, in which algorithmic ad delivery became the operational default and consumer behavior was substantially reshaped; and the AI-mediated era of 2023-2026, in which generative AI, fully algorithmic campaign types and privacy-related signal loss have redefined the conditions of digital advertising. For each era, the paper identifies the dominant technological capabilities, the corresponding consumer-behavior questions and the main research approaches developed in response. Three short illustrative cases drawn from Romanian small and medium e-commerce settings are used to ground the conceptual discussion in contemporary empirical practice. The review concludes with a synthesis of cross-era continuities and discontinuities, with implications for the design of empirical research in digital marketing and with directions for future inquiry in the increasingly algorithmic and generative-AI-mediated marketing environment.

Keywords: digital marketing, artificial intelligence, consumer behavior, social media, narrative review, algorithmic delivery, e-commerce.

JEL: M31, M37, O33, L86.

1. Introduction

Digital marketing as a domain of both practice and inquiry has changed almost beyond recognition over the past two decades. In the early 2010s, marketing managers were primarily concerned with the operational stability of their digital infrastructure – ensuring website availability, securing data, integrating with the first widely adopted social platforms – and the academic literature was focused on conceptualizing the new digital channels (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Constantinides, 2014). By the mid-2010s, attention had shifted toward the systematic monitoring of social networks, the analysis of online consumer behavior and the first commercially available AI-powered search tools (Olteanu, 2014, 2016; Stephen, 2016). By the early 2020s, AI-driven bidding and delivery had become the operational default within the major advertising platforms (Davenport et al., 2020; Huang and Rust, 2021), and the COVID-19 pandemic had introduced a structural shock to consumer behavior whose effects continue to be analyzed today (Sheth, 2020; Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020; Hoțoi, 2024). By the mid-2020s, generative AI and fully algorithmic campaign types have begun to redefine the boundary between what is decided by the advertiser and what is decided by the platform.

These developments did not occur as a sequence of clean, mutually exclusive stages. Each era built on the operational and intellectual achievements of the previous ones, and several of the questions raised in the early 2010s – about how digital techniques shape consumer decisions, about how marketing data can be used to support managerial choices, about how to maintain reliable digital services in the face of growing complexity – remain central to the contemporary research agenda, even as the technological context has changed dramatically. The aim of this paper is to provide a narrative review of this two-decade trajectory, identify continuities and discontinuities across eras and discuss the implications for the design of empirical research in the current AI-mediated marketing environment.

The review is organized around four overlapping eras. Section 2 examines the web infrastructure era of the early 2010s, focusing on the operational foundations of digital marketing capabilities. Section 3 turns to the social analytics era of the mid-2010s, in which monitoring tools, AI-powered search and consumer-behavior research converged. Section 4 covers the maturation era of the late 2010s and the pandemic shock of 2020–2022. Section 5 discusses the AI-mediated era of 2023–2026, with three short illustrative cases drawn from contemporary Romanian e-commerce practice. Section 6 synthesizes the continuities and discontinuities across eras, and Section 7 concludes with implications for research and practice.

2. The web infrastructure era (2010–2013): foundations of digital marketing capabilities

The early 2010s were dominated, on the practitioner side, by concerns about the operational reliability of the digital channels through which marketing activities were beginning to flow. Olteanu (2010), writing on the prevention, backup and restoration procedures necessary for the continuity of web server operation, articulated a set of preoccupations that may appear technical but were – and still are – preconditions for any sustained digital marketing program. A digital campaign cannot deliver value if the underlying web infrastructure is unreliable; the analytics

that inform marketing decisions cannot be trusted if the data they rely on is intermittently lost or corrupted. By the middle of the period, attention was shifting toward cloud computing as a way to handle the growing volume and variety of marketing-relevant data; Olteanu (2013a) discussed the migration of applications to cloud environments and the corresponding questions of data reliability and portability.

On the conceptual side, the early 2010s saw the consolidation of foundational frameworks for understanding the new digital marketing landscape. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), in a paper that has since become one of the most-cited references in the field, proposed a typology of social media that organized a then-confusing proliferation of platforms into a coherent framework, and articulated the strategic challenges and opportunities they presented for businesses. Constantinides (2014), building on this and related earlier work, synthesized the foundations of social media marketing into a structured set of strategic and operational guidelines for managers.

Two characteristics of this era are worth highlighting in retrospect. First, the technological and conceptual layers were tightly coupled: managerial practice could not move faster than the underlying infrastructure allowed, and academic research was occupied with conceptualizing the practices that were just becoming feasible. Second, the agency of the marketing manager remained largely intact: the principal automation decisions concerned the infrastructure, while content, targeting and budgeting decisions were still primarily made by humans.

3. The social analytics era (2013-2016): from online influence to AI-powered search tools

The middle of the 2010s saw a marked acceleration of attention toward the systematic study and operational exploitation of online consumer behavior. Olteanu (2013b), writing on the influencing of the average internet consumer's online behavior, identified the range of digital techniques through which choices, attitudes and preferences could be shaped in online environments. The argument anticipated, in a foundational way, the contemporary discussion on personalization, retargeting and algorithmic content delivery, by treating the influencing of online behavior as an explicit object of managerial design rather than as an incidental byproduct of digital advertising. Stephen (2016), in an influential review of the role of digital and social media marketing in consumer behavior, formalized many of the same intuitions within the consumer-research tradition.

Parallel to the development of consumer-behavior research, the period saw the emergence of dedicated tools for the operational monitoring of social networks by business actors. Olteanu (2014) discussed the new generation of monitoring tools available to firms, while Tuten and Solomon (2017) provided a comprehensive textbook synthesis of the resulting practices. The convergence of consumer-behavior research and monitoring infrastructure produced, by the second half of the period, the first commercially available AI-powered search and audience tools. Olteanu (2016) analyzed Facebook Graph as one of the earliest such tools, intended for data-informed customer acquisition and business management, and prefigured many of the algorithmic mechanisms that would, a decade later, become embedded in mainstream advertising platforms.

This era also produced the conceptual foundations for the contemporary discussion of attribution and customer journeys. Yang and Ghose (2010), in a study of the interaction between organic and sponsored search advertising, documented systematic interdependencies between

channels and warned against simplistic single-channel evaluation, while Kannan, Reinartz and Verhoef (2016) and Anderl et al. (2016) developed multichannel attribution frameworks that remain the methodological backbone of contemporary research.

4. The maturation era (2018-2022): algorithmic mediation and the pandemic shock

By the late 2010s, the operational locus of decision-making within major advertising platforms had shifted decisively from the human advertiser to the platform's machine-learning systems. Davenport et al. (2020) argue that AI is reshaping marketing strategy across three dimensions – tasks, supporting structures and customer engagement – and locate algorithmic ad delivery among the most advanced manifestations of this shift. Huang and Rust (2021) propose a strategic framework in which AI operates on mechanical, thinking and feeling levels, while Vlačić et al. (2021), in a systematic review of AI in marketing, identify advertising and customer relationship management as the most mature application areas. Kumar et al. (2019) emphasize personalization at scale as the most consequential outcome of AI adoption, and Choi et al. (2020) document how programmatic systems internalize bidding decisions in online display markets.

Within this maturation phase, the gap between advertiser intent and algorithmic delivery emerged as a research concern in its own right. Ali et al. (2019), in an empirical analysis of Facebook ad delivery, document significant demographic skews produced by the platform's optimization systems even for nominally inclusive audiences. Lambrecht and Tucker (2019), in a study of STEM career advertising, document complementary patterns and discuss the implications for advertiser accountability. Berman (2018) shows that the choice of attribution model can substantially affect the apparent performance of an advertising account, particularly when the campaign mix evolves over time. Voorveld et al. (2018) and Lee, Hosanagar and Nair (2018) document, in different empirical settings, how engagement with social media advertising varies systematically across content types and audience segments.

Superimposed on this gradual technological maturation, the COVID-19 pandemic produced a sudden and large structural shock. Sheth (2020) argues that the pandemic disrupted established consumer habits across categories and that some of these disruptions are likely to persist. Hoekstra and Leeflang (2020) and Kirk and Rifkin (2020) document the corresponding implications for marketing strategy, while Dwivedi et al. (2021), in a multi-author research agenda, position the post-pandemic period as a natural inflection point for digital and social media marketing research. In the Romanian context, Hoțoi (2024), analyzing Google Ads data from an online retailer over an extended observation window, shows that the pandemic accelerated digital adoption and increased the role of paid digital channels in conversion-generating purchase journeys – effects that remained measurable well after the immediate crisis.

The applied empirical literature from this period also illustrates the broader methodological orientation that became dominant by the early 2020s: the use of digital data sources for empirical analysis across an increasingly diverse range of domains. Bazac et al. (2023) analyze the online referential value of urban historical parks for sustainable management decisions; Grecu et al. (2020) study the role of mega-events in the development of structural tourism capabilities;

Drăghici et al. (2022) examine the demographic dynamics of populations in the Danube Delta, drawing on disaggregated data sources. Each of these studies operates outside the marketing literature in a narrow sense, but each contributes methodologically to the broader practice of using digital and behavioral data for empirical inquiry. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022), in a foundational textbook, summarize the resulting analytical practices for managerial use.

5. The AI-mediated era (2023-2026): generative AI, algorithmic delivery and empirical research

The most recent era – spanning the time from the public release of large generative-AI models in late 2022 through the present – combines three structural transformations that have begun to redefine the field. First, generative AI has moved from research demonstration to operational tool: Eloundou et al. (2023) document, in a large-scale labor-market study, that generative-AI capabilities now overlap with a substantial share of professional tasks, including many tasks in marketing; Brynjolfsson, Li and Raymond (2023) provide complementary evidence on the productivity effects of generative-AI tools in workplace settings. Second, fully algorithmic campaign types – such as Google’s Performance Max and Meta’s Advantage+ – have become the default option in major advertising platforms, internalizing not only bidding decisions but also placement, audience and creative decisions. Third, a sequence of privacy-related changes has progressively eroded the signal richness on which algorithmic delivery and measurement systems rely.

The empirical literature from this era is still emerging. Hoțoi (2024) provides a Romanian longitudinal analysis of Google Ads campaigns over the April 2022 – September 2024 interval, documenting the structural reshaping of consumer behavior and the evolution of paid digital channels in the post-pandemic period. Marin et al. (2025) propose a software-based assessment framework for the analysis of online search behavior, applied in a heritage management context but methodologically transferable to commercial marketing settings. Three short cases from contemporary Romanian small and medium e-commerce practice illustrate the kinds of empirical questions that have become central in this era.

A first illustrative case concerns the comparison between AI-driven Smart Shopping campaigns and manually managed Search campaigns in a Romanian online wine retailer. The case documents how Smart Shopping campaigns generate the largest share of clicks but record lower last-click conversion rates, while manual Search campaigns achieve higher conversion efficiency on direct-response intent. An assisted-conversion analysis, performed over a 30-day lookback window, shows that approximately 47.6% of conversions attributable to Google Ads are assisted rather than last-click, suggesting that last-click attribution systematically underestimates the contribution of AI-driven prospecting campaigns. The case operationalizes, in a small-business setting, the attribution concerns raised by Berman (2018) and Kannan et al. (2016).

A second illustrative case concerns the demographic distribution of impressions delivered by Meta Ads in a remarketing campaign run by a Romanian private aesthetic medicine clinic. The case shows that, within a nominally inclusive remarketing audience, the platform’s delivery algorithm produces a very strong demographic concentration: women aged 35 to 54 absorb close

to 60% of total spend, and women aged 35 to 64 absorb more than three quarters of it. The case provides, in a Romanian healthcare-service setting, empirical evidence of the dynamics documented at a broader level by Ali et al. (2019) and Lambrecht and Tucker (2019), and illustrates the importance of monitoring the realized – rather than only the configured – distribution of algorithmic ad delivery.

A third illustrative case concerns the long-term evolution of search visibility in a Romanian discount e-commerce account, analyzed over a 47-month window. The case documents a non-monotonic trajectory: an early high-visibility phase, a peak-volume phase corresponding to the maturation of AI-driven bidding, and a sustained decline phase in which monthly impressions fall to less than half of their previous peak while click-through rates remain broadly stable. The pattern is consistent with the cumulative effects of privacy-related signal loss and intensified competition for a contracting addressable audience, within a stable algorithmic matching environment. The case extends, in a Romanian setting, the longitudinal patterns discussed by Yang and Ghose (2010), Blake, Nosko and Tadelis (2015) and Hoțoi (2024).

6. Synthesis: continuities and discontinuities across eras

Three continuities are visible across the four eras reviewed above. First, the operational reliability of the underlying digital infrastructure remains a precondition for everything else: the concerns articulated by Olteanu (2010) about web server continuity and by Olteanu (2013a) about cloud-based data reliability are still relevant to the contemporary advertiser, even if they are now embedded in platform services rather than managed directly. Second, the question of how digital techniques shape consumer behavior – introduced by Olteanu (2013b) and developed by Stephen (2016) and many subsequent authors – continues to organize a substantial share of the contemporary research agenda, even as the specific techniques have evolved. Third, the methodological orientation toward the use of digital and behavioral data for empirical inquiry, visible in the applied work of Grecu et al. (2020), Drăghici et al. (2022), Bazac et al. (2023) and Marin et al. (2025), has become a default approach for any empirical study in marketing and adjacent domains.

Three discontinuities are equally visible. First, the locus of decision-making has shifted decisively from the human advertiser to the platform's algorithm, a transformation that has been documented progressively from Olteanu (2016) through Davenport et al. (2020), Huang and Rust (2021) and Vlačić et al. (2021), and that has reached a new threshold with the generalization of fully algorithmic campaign types in 2023-2026. Second, the relationship between advertiser intent and algorithmic delivery has emerged as an autonomous object of research, with Ali et al. (2019) and Lambrecht and Tucker (2019) providing landmark empirical evidence. Third, the contemporary research environment is shaped by structural shocks – the COVID-19 pandemic, privacy-related signal loss, the emergence of generative AI – at a frequency and magnitude that earlier eras did not display.

7. Conclusions

This paper has offered a narrative review of two decades of digital marketing research, organized around four overlapping eras: a web infrastructure era in the early 2010s, a social analytics era in the mid-2010s, a maturation era in the late 2010s combined with the pandemic shock of 2020-2022, and an AI-mediated era from 2023 onward. The review has identified, across these eras, three durable continuities – the importance of operational infrastructure, the centrality of consumer-behavior questions and the methodological orientation toward digital-data analysis – and three structural discontinuities – the shift of decision-making toward platform algorithms, the emergence of advertiser-versus-algorithm dynamics as an autonomous research object, and the increasing frequency of structural shocks in the broader research environment.

The review has several implications for empirical research in digital marketing. First, contemporary empirical work benefits from being explicitly situated within this two-decade trajectory: studies that engage with both the foundational concerns articulated in the early 2010s and the contemporary algorithmic environment are likely to produce more durable contributions than studies that engage only with the current technical configuration. Second, the methodological repertoire developed in adjacent applied domains – the search-behavior frameworks of Bazac et al. (2023) and Marin et al. (2025), the longitudinal demographic analyses exemplified by Drăghici et al. (2022) – offers transferable tools for marketing research that go beyond the standard set of platform-supplied metrics. Third, in the AI-mediated environment, the documentation of the realized – as opposed to the configured – behavior of algorithmic delivery systems becomes a research priority in its own right, complementing the more traditional focus on advertiser strategy.

The review has several limitations. As a narrative rather than systematic review, it cannot claim exhaustive coverage of the relevant literature, and the selection of cited works reflects, inevitably, the perspective and the empirical horizon of the author. The illustrative cases drawn from Romanian small and medium e-commerce practice are intended as supports for the conceptual argument rather than as standalone empirical contributions, and a more developed study would integrate them within a rigorous comparative design. Finally, the AI-mediated era is, by definition, still unfolding: the conceptual framework proposed here will need to be revisited as the operational and behavioral consequences of generative AI, fully algorithmic campaign types and post-cookie measurement environments become better documented. Future research could extend the review along several axes, including the systematic comparison of long-term performance trajectories across multiple sectors and markets, the empirical documentation of the integration of generative AI into marketing workflows and the development of methodological standards for the audit of algorithmic ad delivery in regulated service sectors.

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