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Troubled waters: the transformation of marketing in a digital world

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to establish how strategic target-market selection decisions are shaped, challenged and driven in response to the rapidly evolving technological landscape. The authors critically evaluate the implications of these changes for the role of marketers and the organizational function of marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – The research uses qualitative methods. Key-informant interviews are conducted among senior organizational practitioners within client-side organizations, digital agencies and strategic marketing consultancies, seeking to contrast their views.

Findings – The findings reveal an erosion of responsibility for the integrated strategic role of marketing decision-making. In particular, the authors reveal that the evolving digital landscape has precipitated a sense of crisis for marketers and the role of marketing within the firm. This extends beyond simply remedying a skills-gap and is triggering a transformation that has repercussions for the future of marketing and its practice, thus diminishing functional accountability.

Research limitations/implications – The findings have long-term implications for marketing as a strategic organizational function of the firm and for marketing as a practice.

Originality/value – The study considers an increasingly digitalized marketplace and the associated impact of big data for the function of marketing. It reveals the changing scope of strategic marketing practice and functional accountability.

Keywords Big data, Digitalization, Analytics, Target-Market strategy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The rapidly evolving digital marketing landscape has far-reaching managerial and strategic consequences. While studies have long supported the marketing function's central role in connecting customers to products ([Moorman and Rust, 1999](#)), a

broadening range of problems has undermined credibility in the marketer's role, threatening marketing's distinct organizational capability (Rust *et al.*, 2004). Although the changing role of marketing has resurfaced for debate from institutional (Webster, 1992; Deshpande and Webster, 1989) and operational (Walsh and Lipinski, 2009) perspectives throughout the past 60 years (Bund and Carroll, 1957; Webster, 1981; Moorman and Rust, 1999; Rust *et al.*, 2004), compelling evidence confirms that marketing "must be an integral part of the organization's decision-making framework" (Kumar, 2015, p. 4; Homburg *et al.*, 2015). However, despite considerable research attention, little consideration has been given to the impact of data proliferation and advances in data analytics on functional or strategic responsibilities (Chari *et al.*, 2012), or on the varied nature of marketing practice within the firm (Wensley, 1995; Thorpe and Morgan, 2007; Roberts *et al.*, 2014). A central aim in our study is, therefore, to reveal ways in which the strategic role of marketing is changing as a consequence of the many challenges presented by an evolving technological landscape. In addressing this concern, we reveal that the advancing digital landscape has precipitated a managerial sense of crisis for marketing, triggering a transformation that has repercussions for the future of the discipline and its practice.

The evolving marketing landscape

Following Drucker's (1954) articulation of the marketing concept, the discipline quickly attracted attention as a distinct organizational function (Webster *et al.*, 2005). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, research attention switched from conceptual concerns of managing the marketing function to the strategic pursuit for competitive advantage (Porter, 1985). In particular, researchers in the fields of strategic management and strategic marketing (Anderson, 1982; Day and Wensley, 1983) increasingly emphasized the managerial role of strategy formulation, while strategy implementation notably served as an "invariable consequence of planning" (Thorpe and Morgan, 2007, p. 660). Fortunately, as Thorpe and Morgan (2007, p. 660) continue, insights have since "tempered our knowledge of developing marketing strategy with the realities of executing it". While strategic planning fell out of vogue in the 1980s (Webster *et al.*, 2005), debates concerning marketing's central role in strategy formulation (Browne *et al.*, 2014; Davies and Ardley, 2012; Engelen and Brettel, 2011; McDonald, 2009; Palmer and Simmons, 2010; Varadarajan, 1992) and implementation (Bonoma, 1984; Chebat, 1999; Chimanzhi and Morgan, 2005; Homburg *et al.*, 2004; Miller *et al.*, 2004; Noble, 1999; Noble and Mokwa, 1999; Olson *et al.*, 2005; Piercy, 2002; Qi, 2005; Varadarajan *et al.* 2001; Wind and Robertson, 1983) continue to elicit strong interest even at present (Kumar, 2015; Morgan, 2012).

The reasons for this interest are clear but by no means straightforward to address within empirical research inquiry, not least because the breadth of debate has fragmented the research agenda (Browne *et al.*, 2014). For example, Varadarajan (2010, p. 119) views the evolution of the field of strategic marketing as "a confluence of perspectives, paradigms, theories, concepts, frameworks, principles, methods, models and metrics from a number of related fields of study". While he suggests that this cumulative body of literature is indicative of substantive, theoretical and methodological advances, concerns that have been repeated over a number of decades are widely evident (Bartels, 1974; Wind and Robertson, 1983; Day, 1992; Reibstein *et al.*, 2009), triggering the feared realization of an irretrievable disciplinary collapse. In

highlighting the fundamental research challenges, we particularly note the following themes, which have precipitated the current sense of urgency. These include marketing strategy research fragmentation, marketing's inability to communicate organizational performance and a return on investment and the increasing dispersion of marketing activities.

Marketing strategy research fragmentation

While recent evidence supports the argument that marketing benefits an organization (Homburg *et al.*, 2015), debates around marketing's influence on strategic decision-making in the firm have become prominent. This is, perhaps, unsurprising as it has long been recognized that, "conflicting empirical results founded upon contrasting theoretical premises indicate that marketing strategy implementation is a complex phenomenon" (Thorpe and Morgan, 2007, p. 660). Consequently, Reibstein *et al.* (2009, p. 1) reinforce the pragmatic view that, "we need to ensure that the concepts and methods employed are appropriate for generating valid insights into critical research questions, not whether the methods are the most advanced". Closely aligned to this issue, the dominant methodological nature of scholarly research attention in the discipline (Homburg *et al.*, 2000) leads us to recognize that, "the growing balkanization of academic marketing into quantitative modelling and consumer behaviour [is diminishing] research on strategic marketing issues" (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009, p. 1). This trend is an important consideration for the design and scope of any marketing research inquiry which probes managerial implementation challenges across sectors and industries. It remains a particular managerial concern, not least because of Thorpe and Morgan's (2007, p. 660) widely held view that "a critical determinant in the success and survival of the firm lies the successful implementation of marketing strategies".

The inability to communicate organizational performance and return on investment

The second issue highlights marketing's apparent inability to demonstrate its value (Boyd *et al.*, 2010; Rust *et al.*, 2004; Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009; Webster *et al.*, 2005), thus undermining its influence within the firm (Homburg *et al.*, 2015). Although evidence suggests that, "an influential marketing department makes the greatest contribution to company performance" (Homburg *et al.*, 2015, p. 1), marketing's loss of influence within the firm can substantially be blamed on its lack of financial accountability (Boyd *et al.*, 2010; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2009; Tavassoli *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, the degree to which "marketing can evidence proof of its contribution to company performance" (Tollin and Schmidt, 2012, p. 509) remains limited. This particular challenge raises immediate concerns for the longer-term strategic role of marketing within the firm.

The dispersion of marketing activities

An increasing dispersion of marketing activities coupled with marketing's subsequent loss of influence within the firm has become an overarching research priority over the past decade. As Webster *et al.* (2005, p. 36) note:

[...] many elements of the central marketing function have been "centrifuged", [thus framing the marketing department] as a diaspora of skills and capabilities spread across and even outside the organization.

This raises important questions about the degree of influence that marketing has upon strategic decision-making and the extent to which strategic decisions are being shaped

and challenged in marketing practice ([Krohmer et al., 2002](#)). For [Homburg et al. \(2000\)](#), this poses an interesting proposition for researchers, especially in terms of the perennial question as to whether such changes are initiated within the firm, or as a reaction to environmental transformation.

In this sense, [Homburg et al. \(2000, p. 475\)](#) recognize that, “organizations should structure themselves in order to be more market-oriented and responsive to changing customer needs and market conditions”. However, understanding the complex and evolving managerial nature of this strategic problem remains central to informing understanding of how marketing responsibilities impact upon strategic capabilities in the selection of target-markets. As [Webster et al. \(2005\)](#) explain:

Absent a vocal champion for reinforcement and development of marketing skills across the company - without a corporate marketing “centre of excellence”, in effect - the company is less able to identify and isolate future customers and customer needs and will be less efficient at creating, communicating and delivering value to them.

[Browne et al. \(2014\)](#) raise an additional concern in response to marketing's increasing marginalization. Following [Skålén and Hackley \(2011\)](#), they highlight a lack of research which explores how marketing practice actually influences top management strategy making. If marketing managers wish to re-establish their organizational influence, research studies addressing this concern are an immediate priority ([Browne et al., 2014](#)).

Environmental change and the impact on target market strategy

While environmental forces continue to pressure the marketing function ([Webster et al., 2005](#)), in recent years, some of these have rapidly and dynamically altered the traditional ways in which managers identify market opportunities and shape strategy ([Dibb and Simkin, 2009](#); [Quinn and Dibb, 2010](#)). For example, the transformational socio-economic effects triggered by the recent global financial crisis ([ONS, 2008, 2009](#)), the ever-present requirement for enhanced marketing accountability ([Goodell and Martin, 1992](#); [Shama, 1993](#); [Roberts, 2003](#); [Srinivasan et al., 2005](#)) and an increased emphasis on the strategic role of customer insight are prominent issues in the identification of target markets as organizations struggle to adapt to destabilizing patterns of consumption ([Bainbridge, 2009](#); [ESRC, 2009](#); [MSI, 2014](#)). At the same time, the proliferation of data, particularly data from electronic sources, and advanced analytics ([Brady et al., 2002](#)) are providing an opportunity to enrich market insight, leading to enhanced strategic planning forecasts and operational efficiencies ([Srinivasan et al., 2005](#)). These developments are shaping the disciplinary imagination of marketing practice to an unparalleled degree. However, some commentators express a concern that the traditional strategic underpinnings of marketing may be cast aside ([Leefflang et al., 2014](#)) in favour of a new agenda underpinned by the digital landscape ([Durkin, 2013](#)) and couched in an alternative managerial language of reach, acquisition and conversion targets ([Han et al., 2012](#)). Indeed, “digital marketing” has emerged as a panacea ([Kiani, 1998](#); [Parsons and Waitman, 1998](#); [Wind and Mahajan, 2001](#)), reshaping the commercial agenda, transforming the research landscape and promising a new dimension in the strategic management of markets ([Germann et al., 2012](#)). Mass surveillance and data capture are held as key managerial facilitators in pursuit of understanding and benefiting from the complex and seemingly irrational consumption patterns of consumers presently. Big data, emerging visualization techniques and enhanced computing power promise rich and actionable customer insights of the kind that are fundamental to firms' strategic

decision-making (Day, 2011). Those who champion a digital revolution see this as an exciting opportunity for the discipline (Baker, 2009; Barwise and Farley, 2005; Day and Bens, 2005; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2012) and argue for marketing to reshape itself to survive.

Marketing as a domain is inescapably driven by advances in technology, where every electronically enabled consumer becomes a research participant, driving the realization of a digitally encoded Orwellian society (Berger, 2010; Sletteameås, 2009). Yet few authors have considered the managerial and functional consequences of this rapidly evolving, increasingly digitalized agenda. The implications for marketing, and how to reframe and integrate the conceptual underpinnings of marketing strategy creation and implementation, have been overlooked from the marketing practitioner's perspective. This omission presents an important question central to the current study, as those concerns implicated by the changing technological and social environment have become increasingly exposed in the marketing literature. For example, managers have often struggled to keep pace with the impact of technological change, and a widening gap has been noted between what is technologically possible and what occurs in practice (Day, 2011; Wymbs, 2011; Finch *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, the practices of many marketers are far removed from considering customers at the granular level that e-technology enables (Feit *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, although consumer concerns about privacy are increasing resistance to intrusive tracking and monitoring initiatives (Lyon, 2004; Ball and Haggerty, 2005), the widespread acceptance and consumption of digital and social media suggests that consumer paranoia may have been misjudged. The extent to which this apparent contradiction is a consequence of the gap between the tracking and monitoring possibilities espoused in theory, and the profiling initiatives implemented in practice, is unclear. Despite calls for researchers to keep pace with the corollary of these developments (Sheth and Sisodia, 2015; Wind, 2014), there is a paucity of research examining the ways in which marketing responsibilities are delineated and strategic opportunities are being shaped or compromised in the digital era. The first research question (*RQ1a and RQ1b*) for our study focuses on both aspects of this issue:

RQ1a. How are strategic decisions being shaped and challenged in marketing practice?

RQ1b. Who are the key internal decision makers driving the strategic direction and accountability of marketing activities within organizations?

While some debate exists around the opportunities and barriers that digitalization presents for organizations operating in hyper-competitive business environments (Simmons, 2008; Boyd and Crawford, 2012; Walker and Fung, 2013; Stone and Woodcock, 2014), few studies have specifically examined the role of digitalization alongside the noted managerial drivers which are shifting, or outsourcing, marketing's functional responsibilities and diminishing its influence within the firm (Homburg *et al.*, 2015; Krohmer *et al.*, 2002; Tollin and Schmidt, 2012; Webster *et al.* 2005; Homburg *et al.*, 2000). Accordingly, the consequences for the role of marketers or the function of marketing as a result of these disciplinary developments remain unclear. While external agencies (e.g. digital consultancies) or customer insight teams within the firm may in some instances be leveraging customer insight and acquisition responsibilities away from client-side marketing teams (Leeftang *et al.*, 2014), there is less clarity as to which marketing actors are accountable for strategic marketing decisions. A compounding factor is that many studies concerning the organizational response to the commercial

opportunities promised by advancing technology and big data are conceptual or quantitative (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). They seldom engage discursively with the key marketing actors facing these challenges in their day-to-day roles. For example, as Tollin and Schmidt (2012, p. 509) argue:

[...] although top marketing managers are regularly asked to characterise their company's market orientation, capability, structure, innovation orientation and so on, their ideas principles and doings are rarely the primary object of study (Boyd *et al.*, 2010; Lamberti and Nocia, 2009).

While research has focused on the technological barriers arising from digital data, new metrics and advanced analytics (Sorescu *et al.*, 2011; Snijders *et al.*, 2012; Humby *et al.*, 2008), little attention has been given to the impact of advancing technology and data proliferation on how marketing is practiced. Therefore, a more substantive question concerns how such developments might be shaping functional contours.

This leads to the final two research questions:

RQ2. How is strategic target market identification decision-making evolving in response to the increasing prevalence of data, new metrics and advanced analytics?

RQ3. What disciplinary pressures and implications are presented as a consequence of marketing's changing technological landscape?

Methodology

Qualitative research inquiry was the means to critically evaluate perspectives across different organizations and industry types and to inform a detailed understanding of the issues raised. Participant organizations were selected for inclusion on the basis that they would enable exposure to a substantial depth of insight across a broad range of industry types. While the objective of this study is not to generalize across organizations or industries, we aim to empirically evaluate a range of marketing-related problems and challenges, allowing us to comment upon sensitive issues that may be impacting upon functional responsibilities. The intended theoretical contribution is a substantive one in that it lies central to identifying the changing disciplinary nature of marketing as an organizational function.

Key-informant selection

Given the aim was to examine a range of managerial issues, a convenience sampling design and a key-informant interviewing method (Mitchell, 1993, 1994) were appropriate (Gill and Johnson, 2002). The research team used personal networks to identify and obtain access to a number of UK-based, globally represented firms. Taking advantage of snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), informants from 20 organizations were interviewed, representing specialist data and research consultancies, manufacturing and service organizations, as well as digital marketing agencies. Managerial exposure to high-level strategic decision-making was a primary driver for sample selection, and many informants possessed significant experience within high-level strategic marketing contexts (e.g. Global Heads of Digital, Innovation and Cloud-based Marketing and Marketing Directors). We chose not to limit the empirical scope of our inquiry to the functional context (usually located within client-side organizations) because there is no evidence that the challenges identified are wholly located within

functional marketing teams. Furthermore, as strategic marketing activities of many organizations are not limited to the functional domain, we did not want to limit the scope of our findings. Half of our informants were employed within specialist marketing strategy consultancies and digital marketing agencies, operating on a global scale among the leading firms in their respective sectors. On the client-side, the following retail and service sectors were represented: mobile telecommunications, air travel, fast-moving consumer goods manufacturing, petrochemical, betting and gaming and financial services. A key strength of our study is the access we achieved to this senior level of informant. Such insights are seldom documented in empirical marketing studies, despite evidence suggesting that higher-ranking informants tend to be “more reliable sources of information than their lower status counterparts” (Phillips, 1981, p. 412). Table I details the range of organizations taking part in the research along with the key-informants’ roles. To retain a necessary degree of ethical integrity and to protect each organization’s commercial interests (Kirkup and Carrigan, 2000), the names of organizations and key-informants are disguised.

Data collection and analysis

Key-informant interviews took place between April 2013 and December 2014. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured checklist of issues (Appendix) informed by our three central research questions. In common with many qualitative studies, it was important to allow respondents to talk openly about the issues, and in particular, marketing’s role in shaping and accounting for the strategic direction of the organization. The semi-structured interview template supported this aim, allowing us to explore the key issues freely and without prejudice (Irvine *et al.*, 2013). All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted between 90 and 150 min, allowing us to access over 40-h of interview material. Internal company documentation was also provided by interviewees, allowing detailed operational overviews of case organizations. Some of the organizations were known to members of the research team through previous research and consultancy exercises, some going back over a 30-year period. This experience enabled a fuller and broader exposure to the research context, something not easily established by qualitative researchers when gaining organizational access (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). The depth of insight drawn from the empirical aspect of the inquiry enables us to assert a substantial degree of qualitative credibility (Tracey, 2010) to the data gathered.

Following an established inductive process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) of applied thematic analysis (Guest *et al.*, 2012), the interview transcripts, which were our primary data source, were initially freely coded, as possible interpretations and themes were explored. The analysis began with four members of the research team reading the transcripts, then sharing their notes, allowing the core themes to emerge iteratively (Spiggle, 1994). The core themes were subsequently refined by one member of the research team, before being independently assessed by the others (Campbell *et al.*, 2013). During this process, the text was systematically ordered to establish a number of “categories, types and relationships of meaning” (Guest *et al.*, 2012, p. 52). Consequently, we use the terminology of Corbin and Strauss (2008) when we refer to our themes as core categories (core themes) and concepts (sub-themes). This does not alter the interpretivist epistemological basis of our claims but does provide a level of consistency in our reporting of them.

Case organization Type	Case organization descriptor	Organization details	Key-informant role
Strategy consultants	Consultant A	US\$60m turnover. 700 employees. Global US-head-quartered agency specializing in digital data collection, with expertise in online panels	CEO
	Consultant B	€1.3bn sales. Over 12,000 employees	Global Head of Innovation and Digital
	Consultant C	US\$90bn annual revenue. 350,000 employees globally	Head of Analytics/Director
	Consultant D	£1.6bn annual revenue. Over 10,000 employees (UK\Ireland)	Global Head of Cloud Marketing and BD
Digital agencies	Consultant E	£7m annual turnover, 70 employees	CEO
	Agency A	Marketing and communications agency. Eur. 100m sales in 2014. Circa 100 employees	Communications Consultant
	Agency B	Recent start-up behaviour change consultancy company	Founding partner and Director of Marketing
	Agency C	Leading futurologists and trend forecasters in the UK, with operations in North America and Europe	Founding Partner and Director of Insight
	Agency D	£25m annual revenue, circa 200 employees. Fast growing UK-based global digital agency	Head of Marketing (UK)
	Agency E	£5m turnover, circa 30 employees. Digital agency, specializing in social media management and data analytics	Online Marketing Manager

(continued)

Case organization type	Case organization descriptor	Organization details	Key-informant role
Client organizations	Client A	€2,500m annual turnover	Social Media Manager
	Client B	Air travel business	Head of Marketing for UK, Nordic and Continental Europe
		kr23billion	
		Petrochemical business	
	Client C	£6m annual revenue	Head of New Proposition
		Retail mobile telecommunications business	
	Client D	Multi-billion turnover, top five European insurance business	Senior VP Marketing
	Client E	£4m annual revenue. UK-based branded food company operating in 28 countries	Head of Marketing
	Client F	£25m annual turnover Dynamic change management consultancy business	Head of BD and Marketing
	Client G	Leading software supplier to the retail sector	General Manager and Marketing Head
	Client H	£14,000mi annual turnover. Large gambling and gaming business	Marketing Head
			Customer Engagement Director
	Client I	£60m annual turnover. Regional insurance brokers	Chairman and MD
	Client J	€40m global sales. Construction materials manufacturer	Head of Marketing and Strategy

Source: Internal company documentation

The validity of the research process reflects the degree to which we captured the views and experiences of those we interviewed (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012) and the extent to which the method and analysis robustly address the research questions. The sampling of senior informants with a high level of expertise added to the face validity of the data, while sampling from a range of organization types and sectors increased the credibility of the findings (Miles *et al.*, 2014), albeit within the limits of the scale of the study. This approach also allows for “maximum variation” within the sample (Miles and Huberman, 1994), exposing us to a greater breadth of contextual insight without losing focus on the central research questions concerning disciplinary and organizational change (Pettigrew, 1985). Involving four members of the research team in the data gathering and coding process helped to minimize bias. This investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1989) also helped to corroborate the emerging themes and to increase confidence in the validity of the findings.

As the analysis evolved, many themes were reviewed and revised, to reveal a number of core categories and concepts across the data set. At this stage in the analysis, NVivo was used to help organize the data, so that interview quotes relating to the themes and sub-themes that are used to support the plausibility of the findings could be readily identified. In total, three core categories (*crisis*, *transformation* and *vision*) and eight concepts (*complexity*, *role*, *tradition*, *power*, *interpretation*, *integration*, *collaboration* and *control*) were established, respectively forming the structural and discursive basis of our subsequent presentation of findings.

Research findings

A striking feature of the findings is that all informants drew upon the metaphor of “change” to explain their experiences, the challenges they faced and their views about how marketing’s preoccupation with the generation and analysis of customer insight is shaping the trajectory of their professional activities. These arguments are meaningful in relation to the research questions outlined. We use three core categories of *crisis*, *transformation* and *vision* to frame an instrumental narrative to capture and make sense of the ways in which managers shape marketing strategy and identify target market opportunities within a changing technological and digital landscape. In the following discussion, we evaluate arguments raised in the marketing literature, presenting excerpts from the transcripts which support our thematic interpretation of the data (Alvesson, 2003). Table II provides an overview of our findings, summarizing the core categories (in columns) and indicative concepts (illustrated in brackets). The purpose is to supplement our discussion, aiding in the transparency of our “thick” description (Ryle, 1971) of organizational cultures across the data set. This approach enhances the plausibility of our interpretive construction, as we attempt to establish “the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83).

Marketing: towards a disciplinary crisis

Although the measurement of marketing productivity is not a new concern for the discipline (Rust *et al.*, 2004), understanding this challenge within the context of big data and digital reinforces and elucidates some of the difficulties that arise. Identifying how increasing digitalization may influence and shape strategic marketing practice also becomes pivotal to comprehending how managers respond to the dynamic technological

Core theme Case organization	Crisis	Transformation	Vision
Strategy Consultant A	Big data are the problem not the solution (complexity)	Channel integration is a key challenge (integration)	Tactical organizational role and USP limitations (control)
Strategy Consultant B	Decisions require simplicity, data create complexity (interpretation)	Tension between strategic propositions and tactical implementation (integration)	Functional focus on ROI (role)
Strategy Consultant C	Sound judgment is required (interpretation)	Channel integration is key challenge (integration)	Functional focus on ROI (role)
Strategy Consultant D	Data are the problem, and interpretation is the solution (interpretation)	Channel and strategy (integration) is the challenge	Strategic opportunities only limited by a lack of creativity\skill (power)
Strategy Consultant E	Increasingly driven by COOs, CMOs, CFOs (role)	Channel integration is key challenge (integration)	Channel advantage increasingly held those with the ecosystems in place, e.g. Amazon (power)
Agency A	Uncertainty driving change (role)	Client collaboration is a priority (collaboration)	No strategic future for marketing function (role)
Agency B	Sound judgment is required (interpretation)	Channel integration is key challenge (integration)	No strategic future for marketing function (role and power)
Agency C	Uncertainty driving change (role)	Channel integration is key challenge (integration)	Analytics, innovation and logistics: re-engineering brands\products (collaboration)
Agency D	Data are not the solution (integration)	Primary focus on ROI (power)	The legislative situation (role)
Agency E	Sound judgment is required, but ROI is critical (control)	Client collaboration is a priority (collaboration)	No strategic future for marketing function (role)

(continued)

Table II.

Core theme			
Case organization	Crisis	Transformation	Vision
Client A	Sound judgment is required (interpretation)	Channel integration is key challenge (integration)	Blurring of strategy and tactics. (integration)
Client B	Access to data is often limited but seen as essential (power)	Primary focus on ROI (power)	Only beginning to grasp benefits of digital\focus on ROI (power)
Client C	Sound judgment is required (interpretation)	Decisions require simplicity, data create complexity (interpretation)	Multi-platform opportunities (integration)
Client D	Opportunity to support marketing decision-making and ROI (integration)	Data were seen as the solution but now presents the problem (complexity)	Focus on ROI (power)
Client E	Big data are the problem not the solution (complexity)	Channel integration is key challenge (integration)	Retail power increasingly held those with the ecosystems in place (e.g. Amazon) (power)
Client F	Can now drive ROI and resourcing but needs clarity (interpretation)	Keeping activities and internal operations simple (integration)	Only just recognising the benefits of digital engagement (role)
Client G	Greater visibility and topicality than ever before (power)	Resourcing across channels\new media options (integration)	Still constrained by limited and patchy business-to-business client uptake (role)
Client H	Client-led micro-based engagement and experience around better ROI (role)	Internal channel integration, coordination, resourcing (integration)	Multi-platform opportunities to follow and own the customer (power)
Client I	ROI of micro campaigns (role)	Channel integration and migration (integration)	Constrained by patchy client uptake and speed to embrace (role)
Client J	Cost-effective activities across far more audiences (integration)	Bandwidth to keep multiple channels aligned and topical (complexity)	Limited by resources, specialist expertise and creativity (role)

environment. Informants articulated that the rapid pace of economic and technological change and the immediacy of big data and digital insight are driving a volatile period of disciplinary uncertainty. Those we interviewed remained sensitive to a changing commercial climate, framing the beginnings of an intense period of transition following the recent global recession. As one digital agency informant commented:

[Our clients] realised that they didn't know who their customer was any more. The period of progressive growth that they'd been through throughout the nineties and the noughties meant that they hadn't really spent much time investing in working out who their customer was or what their customer profile was; they didn't need to. We'd also moved into the period where, for many, your customer could age from 15 to 95, it didn't really matter; you could target them all with exactly the same method and with the same message. [Clients] suddenly looked around and because the consumer was no longer behaving in the way that they were supposed to, according to marketing metrics which had defined growth for that 20-year period:

I don't know who my customer is any more. I have no idea how they behave. I have no idea what they're interested in. I've really lost sight of who they are (Informant, Digital Agency C).

Researchers have for many decades been preoccupied with the evolution of target-market identification in response to increasing data and enhanced analytic capability (Wind, 1987; Wedel and Kamakura, 2002). The challenge of integrating digitally sourced data within the strategic planning process (Peltier *et al.*, 2012) is therefore not new. Managers have always sought quicker and greater access to data as a route to more sophisticated insights. However, recent developments have transformed the potential of marketing into the realms of science fiction. The following comments illustrate the novel ways in which those we interviewed from each of the three groups explain the significance of this evolution:

Big data means enormous complexity. It means very sophisticated methods. It means more powerful algorithms, and computer hardware to crunch the data, than we ever used before. The NASA guys get nervous when they look at the hardware that marketing people are using nowadays because it's better than what they used for their missions to the moon ten years ago (Informant, Strategy Consultant B).

It's much easier executionally to refine what we're doing: we have more data, we've got better tools, we can make decisions based on bigger, better data-sets more quickly than we could do. And because we can now look at attribution modelling, we can look at it across channels. We can say: "Okay, so what this tells us is that if we create more visibility at this part of a user journey we're going to sell more stuff for you". Five years ago that would have been science fiction (Informant, Digital Agency D).

Social media has changed marketing a lot and one thing that is new is definitely targeting: we can target people much better and have to target people much better, so that you are relevant to your audience [...]. if you're not relevant you're just annoying (Informant, Client A).

However, while the potential of recent technological advances is significant, other informants emphasized that unlimited access to data alone is not the solution. One client saw it as "[...] a plus and a negative" and went on to explain that "It really depends which curve you're riding at that time so [...] if things are going bad then the digital world doesn't help you". (Informant, Client J). Another informant commented:

If you look at some of the High Street big names that have gone under. They've gone with data that was maybe not their own, or they've gone with an approach where they've built something a long

time ago and they've not refreshed it, or they've not adjusted to the fact that the marketplace is different and a completely different dynamic (Informant, Strategy Consultant C).

As in the “pre-big data era” (Dibb and Simkin, 2001, 2009), a number of barriers to marketing strategy are associated with the ability to source meaningful and actionable insights from data. Informants in each of the groups we interviewed recognized the difficulties clients are facing in managing these issues, as this consultant explains:

There aren't enough people and businesses that understand how to use data [...] The single biggest problem is that they're focused on 1980s principles: you need a data warehouse; it needs to have all of your data in it and it needs to be accurate; it needs to be robust; it needs to be absolutely 100 per cent trustable. Today's world doesn't work that way [...] the data that we've got is emerging, it's proliferating, it's huge, voluminous; it comes from new sources every day. The corporates are struggling to keep pace with the marketplace that's going on around them (Informant, Strategy Consultant C).

These concerns were also articulated by the client informants, many of whom express concerns about generating good quality insights from the vast amount of available data. One pointed out that:

[...] there is more and more data in this day and age, but that doesn't mean there is more insight” (Informant, Client E), while another explained that: “In our experience, you always end up having more data and research than you need and the tricky question is to see which we use and how we actually digest it (Informant, Client C).

This argument supports the view that meeting the demands of a data-driven marketplace has placed increasing pressure on managers to either develop new skills or to attract suitably qualified and experienced personnel (Day, 2011; Ready and Conger, 2007). Client informant C spoke about the pressure of “[...] putting the right kind of people in the right roles, who can analyse the data, who can work with us on getting the insights”, while another talked about the marketing department needing to be “knowledge experts” (Informant, Client J). However, this call for external resource (Ernst, 2003) is not instigated from within established marketing teams, as it might have been in the past; instead, it originates from higher up in the organization:

It was very clear through the way we were being approached that it was coming from very high up, it would have been from COOs, from FDs, and from CEOs who were turning to their teams, asking the questions and getting lots of shrugged shoulders. So, while we would have been approached traditionally through brand managers and marketing directors, there was clearly a different type of imperative in the sort of work that we saw and the scale and the scope of what we were being asked to do (Informant, Digital Agency C).

The increasingly complex nature of marketing as an organizational function is clearly apparent. For many informants, particularly on the client side, a combination of tighter budgets, pressures to provide actionable insights, data proliferation from a broader range of sources, the increasingly sophisticated technological focus and the demand for new skills signposts is what we label a moment of *crisis*. The role of others from outside the marketing department – and often from outside the company – in providing the new skills and addressing the knowledge gap – presents a new challenge, one which infringes on the scope and contribution of the marketing department and potentially diminishes its role.

Furthermore, the increasingly digitalized marketing landscape is compounding the troubled situation, and uncertainty prevails. For example, one area of uncertainty highlighted by all of the informant groups concerns the ability to harness the benefits of social media:

We dabbled into it [social media] [...] mainly Twitter [...] and mainly as a channel to leverage or to distribute thought leadership on an ongoing basis. What we discovered was that it wasn't necessarily reaching the decision makers that we needed to get the information in front of. So, social media for us tended to be a less effective channel. But worse than that, and more importantly, what it did create was an awful lot of low value noise (Informant, Client F).

There are a lot of questions at the moment being asked of social media in general, the effectiveness of it and are people really engaging with my brand, the cost to them of just liking something is very trivial. So what do I get for it? (Informant, Strategy Consultant A).

For many marketing practitioners, the emergence of these issues suggests a significant period of *transformation* for the discipline.

Marketing: a functional transformation

Since the widely accepted origins of the market segmentation debate ([Smith, 1956](#)), key developments in the segmentation literature have reinforced the view that access to more robust data offers greater opportunities to enhance target propositions ([Quinn et al., 2007](#), p. 442). However, all of those interviewed suggest that interpretation, rather than access to data, is now the real concern:

There is more and more data in this day and age but that doesn't necessarily mean there is more insight. You get drowned in numbers (Informant, Client C).

We frequently come across situations where there are big variances in data [...] sometimes the ability to measure and refine does create a level of strategic blindness to actually just making the right decision and doing things (Informant, Digital Agency D).

The implication is that decision-making is impeded by what [Langley \(1995\)](#) describes as "paralysis by analysis". This inability to draw meaningful and actionable insights has long been recognized as a difficulty for managers implementing market segmentation solutions ([Piercy and Morgan, 1993](#)) central to the strategic planning process. These circumstances encourage a reversion to simpler, more usable, schemes as one of the digital agency informants explains:

Say you have six or seven groups, about 15 per cent in each group, or whatever it is. That's fine because mentally I can get my head around that but actually in truth there's 36, 100 different segments. I can't get my head around that, so I'm not going to use that (Informant, Digital Agency B).

However, while conceptual and methodological concerns prevail among some agencies – and clients in particular – the strategy consultancies are embracing the opportunities that this situation offers. For these informants:

In the past, we were extremely worried about within segment heterogeneity. It was a methodological problem. Nowadays [...] you look for it [...] and you try to use it. The segments are rough patterns that you apply, but within these patterns your algorithm, then, is using the heterogeneity to fine-tune the value proposition (Informant, Strategy Consultant B).

The changing nature of the digital marketplace, arguably driven by online business models, has completely destroyed traditional marketing understandings for some organizations. The online retailer, Amazon, was frequently cited as a leading driver of this transformation:

Amazon has an enormous potential to individualize the value proposition. There's the one big target segment and that's people who buy products or services online. That's it. Within that target segment, they try to develop an almost completely individualized proposition. And now they even translate it into local deals. They know where you're living; they know what you like. The algorithms might still need some tweaking, but they're getting there (Informant, Strategy Consultant B).

The Amazon model, however, is not necessarily a generalizable solution. Not every organization can or needs to individualize the value proposition. While there is very little, if any, available cross-sectional evidence, informants suggested that in many organizations, traditional segmentation solutions still have an important role to play:

If you're buying media in the old fashioned sense of buying media - TV slots, radio - you're going to need some sort of demographic, some sort of target segmentation profile; because otherwise you're really flying blind. But equally you would think that most brands would be interested in things like lifetime customer value, but for some brands that's got no relevance whatsoever [...] you've got a lot of diversity there (Informant, Digital Agency D).

Differences in opinion were evident in relation to how the targeting process should be operationalized according to specific circumstances. In this sense, the digital revolution (Wind and Mahajan, 2001; Charlesworth, 2009) compounds the problem and reinforces a substantial degree of misunderstanding:

There's almost a new attitude amongst young marketing people, or the ones that grew up in the digital era, that everything has to be instant, everything has to be real time or nearly real time; that all data sources have to be linked and so on, that it's not applicable to all channels and all sources. The more seasoned marketing people say we can only do that for digital, and they almost don't embrace it, because to them this is still a niche phenomenon that only applies to the digital world (Informant, Strategy Consultant B).

More importantly, informants offered insights to suggest that these tensions were beginning to fragment the role of marketing as an organizational function:

Marketing's almost at the point of being commoditised [...] and what I observe and hear from a lot from my colleagues as well, is that traditional marketing is [...] being alienated. So the traditional marketing guys - the ones who plan the TV campaign [...] print campaigns [...] promotional activities and whatever, and the digital marketing guys, are separate. And that's a very unhealthy set-up (Informant, Strategy Consultant B).

The procurement function is dominating, the finance function is dominating and even the HR function is dominating. As the environment's become more pressured, marketing has got pushed down the pecking order. Most of the marketing expertise sits in activation and delivery, not in actually answering some of those harder to answer questions like: How much shall I spend? Where shall I spend it? Those core questions, if you like (Informant, Digital Agency B).

For many organizations, outsourcing digital and analytic components of the marketing function has become the norm, something that exposes a skills gap among practitioners and fractures the consistency of strategy formulation and implementation:

So many clients still don't have analytics departments; still don't have the ability to do stuff in-house, so they rely on third parties (Informant, Strategy Consultant C).

In the business to business world I think it's a little bit more challenging. I'm not sure I've really been able to identify an organization that's really been cutting edge in terms of how they go to market (Informant, Client G).

We totally have influence because most companies are in a panic about what they're going to do (Informant, Digital Agency A).

As the last of these three informants reveal, this situation has presented a lucrative commercial opening, especially for digital marketing agencies. Digital agencies are fully aware of the client-side *crisis* and, as these informants observe, appear more than happy to exploit the opportunity:

The challenge always is to go more senior [...] get into the boardroom, if you can, and have a sponsor for the work. You really need to have a top-down buy-in and I think it's hard to do this without that because what tends to happen is it affects most things across the business. It can change internal agendas as much as external agendas; in that sense, the more senior the better (Informant, Digital Agency B).

If clients are prepared to share their own data with the agency, the agencies will create their own performance dashboards. They'll take clicks, sales, whatever measures they've mapped out. Typically, it goes to the agency to create that capability on behalf of clients. And marketing people need to do that for themselves to be able to have control over their businesses and understand what's happening (Informant, Digital Agency B).

Without the necessary skill set, there is a real danger for client organizations seeking to identify beneficial collaborative relationships. Consequently, functional dangers for the role of marketing are exposed within the client–agency relationship as a result of this situation:

Big data is a wonderful thing and yes, it's amazing all the fantastic things we can do with that data. But as a data analytics person, I have to say that you'd better know what to do with your big data. You better know how to get rid of the noise. You better know how to extract real relationships, real causal relationships from that data, and these are enormous challenges (Informant, Strategy Consultant B).

Skills, processes, structures need to realign [...] Digital is part of doing business. It's now in the mainstream. So, by having digital experts, you're marginalizing other people in the organization. It's got to be in the mainstream of everyone's title and job spec, regardless of age. [Get it] integrated and the word digital disappears. It just becomes part of doing business, digital cuts through everything [...] organizational design has to deal with that reality (Informant, Digital Agency B).

The growth in digital has been accompanied by a proliferation in digital agencies, big data experts and social media analysts. At best, this represents a growing complexity to manage; but at worst, there is potential for these diverse stakeholders to compete with the incumbent marketing function for the ear of senior executives, for budgets and to shape marketing strategy and programmes. Failure to develop the necessary skills and capabilities compounds this threat to the traditional role of marketing. In terms of the growing complexity, one client commented, "And now we have to make all these external partners communicate with each other and sometimes that is not very easy!" (Informant, Client A). The risk posed by having to manage additional stakeholders, some of which are external to the organization, is captured in the words of one senior marketing executive:

We weren't really identified specifically on any of the management teams [...] it was a feeling of floating and trying (sic) to have an influence. We're trying to know who the customers are, but what has changed is the amount of other people who are involved in the decision-making, or potentially have an influence on the end result (Informant, Client B).

Outsourcing the digital and/or analytic resource is creating other problems, too. The requirement for organizations to remain compliant with constantly changing legislative requirements expands the functional role of marketing teams and also impacts on the operational possibilities in practice:

Quite often there is also a compliance unit that sits external of marketing that then has to be engaged through marketing and the processes. If that compliance side doesn't exist in the client – because often it doesn't – does that present an opportunity that underpins the role of the agency, the consultant? (Informant, Strategy Consultant C)

In addition to the compounding pressures of legislation, barriers to implementing effective target-market strategy (Dibb and Simkin, 2001) also resurface. Such barriers are especially prevalent in larger, more inflexible, client-side organizations. As one informant explained, "Big organizations have a massive challenge in joining those things up, because they're organizationally very siloed [...] they just don't talk to each other very much". (Informant, Digital Agency D). Those that outsource various aspects of their strategic planning also face difficulties:

The other observation I have is some of the big strategic segmentations that are done early on in the process are rarely applied effectively [...] segmentations are used to help thinking when you're trying to develop a strategy, then they're abandoned and at different stages, reinvented by different parties further down the line (Informant, Digital Agency B).

A business needs to have a hierarchy to understand what the KPIs are at every level of business. That rarely happens [...] measuring impact and so on at different levels, businesses have not really embraced that. They will not all get the most out of this more complex world until they do that (Informant, Digital Agency D).

These issues portray a transformational period for the role of the marketing function, driven by changes in technology, the financial climate, resourcing costs, legislation and the provision of outsourced services. Furthermore, client-side marketers are under increasing pressure to maximize organizational returns on investment; as one informant explained, "[Marketing] has to find the right language for itself that is accountable" (Informant, Digital Agency B). All of this, at a time when key planning and analytic processes are often conceded to external agents. Ultimately, the marketing function has to evidence its contribution to organizational performance (Tollin and Schmidt, 2012), while hindered by digital developments that cannot, due to inflexible organizational structures, be seamlessly integrated within planning processes. This is an important finding in our study, as subsequent conflation of strategic planning with tactical implementation is also altering the strategic role of marketing within the firm:

[...] in terms of the selection of those markets that's, obviously, that's a decision that involves marketing, legal [...] within [Client H we have] the corporate development office who focus very, very strategically around potential opportunities for growth, and mergers and acquisitions within any given market; but ultimately the decision is made by the Chief Exec (Informant, Client H).

If you [deliver] that message across six channels and they [the customer] start off on their phone, they decide they want to switch halfway through that to a call centre and then they need to complete via a postal application [...] Who gets the credit for that sale? Is that through the third party that it sold through on an app? Is it the website that they also researched on before they went on the app? The ability to measure and track and hone your performance metrics need to be that much more evolved (Informant, Strategy Consultant C).

This period of *transformation* suggests that the future role of marketing as a function is uncertain. Its place within the strategic planning process has become tenuous, a vulnerability that signposts a period of opportunity and further growth for those organizations with the capabilities to take advantage. This future is being shaped, at least in the short-term, by those with vested interests, particularly by managers who are more familiar with the language and practices that digital specialists use. Consequently, the following section frames our final core category to provide a disciplinary *vision* of how managers across industry types are shaping that future.

Marketing: a disciplinary vision

Strategy consultants and digital agencies highlight two contradictory trends shaping the future for client-side marketing teams, both revolving around the utilization and integration of “big data”. These trends reveal that while seeking to embrace and capitalize on data, client organizations also expect simplicity in how the solutions are presented:

One trend is that the CMO wants a dashboard in his office that aggregates everything that’s happening with the brand and the product and so on, to whatever three KPIs. And he wants them in real time, nice pie chart, nice bar chart, and maybe a word cloud [...] the most dramatic simplification. At the same time, you have the big data phenomenon, and big data means enormous complexity (Informant, Strategy Consultant B).

Big data is not the solution. Big data is actually the problem. What clients really want is small data which is simple; it’s the needle in the haystack. It’s not the big data they want (Informant, Strategy Consultant A).

Many clients share this view. As one client informant explained, “We still have a lot of agency data that we don’t have time to digest, sometimes less data is better than more data” (Informant, Client C). Another mentioned that, “Data overload doesn’t mean quality of insight is improving” (Informant, Client E), continuing to explain that, “Today you’ve got a huge amount of data but not necessarily more insight [...] unless you try very hard”.

In practice, because these client organizations often lack the capabilities to capture a holistic view of their markets, they find themselves exposed to shifting consumer behaviours, vulnerable to everyday marketplace uncertainties and at a distinct competitive disadvantage. Worse still, our findings reveal that many such organizations may never be able to integrate their strategic vision across multiple channels. They simply do not have the organizational infrastructures or the degree of accountability that will enable them to achieve this aim as the following comment illustrates:

The power will be with the organizations that have these ecosystems. And the big ecosystems are Google, Amazon [...] Amazon has a huge ecosystem, nobody really realises it. And then I guess the logical conclusion is that brands will kind of buy from these ecosystems or work with them. That’s where the data is going to be because they’ve got the unifying view; they’re not

just looking at my shop or your shop or another shop, they're looking at behaviour on a much larger scale than any single retailer can do but Google will have a single customer view (Informant, Digital Agency D).

Undoubtedly, some of the client organization interviewees are aware of the need to evolve, with some evidence pointing towards the development of a collaborative model of knowledge transfer (Hansen and Nohria, 2004). Such a model would involve a more iterative way of working, in which clients and agencies pool their resources to co-create systems for gathering and exploiting customer insight as the following informants expose:

Increasingly [...] the parent company is encouraging people across different brands to work with each other, learn from each other, but also, in terms of career development as well, so there's lots of encouragement to actually try and keep the right people, or the people that the organization want to keep. So that's encouraged quite a lot [...] it's interaction on a daily basis in terms of work but also in terms of moving across businesses (Informant, Client J).

We'll increasingly work in a more collaborative kind of way. I don't think it will be feasible to have agency client relationships; I think it will be much more collaborative. We'll spend more time with clients and they'll spend more time with us. And if we can invest them with the skills that we have it's kind of a win-win situation: it makes them look good; it means they can be advocates in their business about digital marketing and what that really means (Informant, Digital Agency D).

Evaluative discussion of findings

While this study was motivated by the need to better understand how the role and activities of marketing within the firm are changing as a consequence of technological advance associated with the digital era, it also contributes to ongoing debates concerning the functional influence of marketing (Homburg *et al.*, 2015) and its inability to demonstrate a return on organizational performance (Boyd *et al.*, 2010; Rust *et al.*, 2004; Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009; Webster *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, our findings begin to remedy the lack of research which explores how marketing practice influences top management strategy making (Skålén and Hackley, 2011). In addressing these issues, we have investigated how marketing responsibilities are delineated, and strategic opportunities are formulated. Our findings highlight changes in how marketing is practiced, as a consequence of the evolving technological landscape, and show the implications for marketing within the firm. In particular, we reveal how rapid technological change has precipitated a functional transformation, which is having repercussions for the future of marketing and its practice. The following discussion frames these findings in relation to the three research questions that guided the study and, in each case, pinpoints proposals for further research.

Strategic decision-making and the accountability of marketing

The recent proliferation in data and developments in data analytics bring huge opportunities in relation to market insight and the identification of target markets, as well as providing broader insights which can inform marketing strategy. Paradoxically, many managers now have more data than they can realistically manage, a situation that continues to raise difficulties of its own (Langley, 1995). Just as in the past, when many organizations lacked the necessary in-house skills to manipulate and model customer data (Dibb and Simkin, 2001), technological knowledge gaps are proving to be a major

challenge. Senior marketing managers, who have not “grown up” in a digital environment, find themselves technically ill-equipped, a lack of understanding that is limiting how creatively the data can be used in practice ([Slater et al., 2010](#)).

Organizational responses to these skill shortfalls include outsourcing the manipulation of data to agencies or transferring the responsibility to insight managers or data officers who may not be located within the marketing team. This is creating a new type of a crisis for marketing than previously has been described in the literature ([Bartels, 1974](#); [Wind and Robertson, 1983](#); [Day, 1992](#); [Reibstein et al., 2009](#)). The growing role of insight teams not located within the marketing function and the use of external digital agencies which often have the ear of the client’s leadership team risk marginalizing and subordinating the marketing function. Both the richness of the data and sophistication of the routines available for its manipulation enable segmentation projects and market assessments to be completed more quickly and at lower cost than in the past. Where there is a separation of data handling from the marketing team, there are, however, several consequences. A principle concern is the extent to which marketers have control over the market insights that arise from digital data, insights which are an essential input to strategic decision-making. This issue of control is compounded by the fact that other senior stakeholders recognize the valuable insights that digital data can offer and increasingly go direct to those handling the data. Consequently, while the availability of these data is crucial in helping firms become more market-led, it is not necessarily marketers who are leading the charge. Accountability for marketing strategy decision-making is also more ambiguous, often falling outside of the sole control of senior marketers.

We find that in sectors such as retailing and fast-moving consumer goods manufacturing, these changes are affecting the perceived currency of fundamental concepts such as market segmentation and market strategy development. In other areas, for example, in business-to-business or the financial services sector, where media placement decisions use traditional marketing channels (e.g. television, print, etc.), we find that traditional strategic marketing practices remain an essential element of managers’ decision-making. These contradictions are partly reconciled in consumer markets by the fact that “one-to-one” and “micro segments” – which are enabled by big data - can often be generated by breaking down more traditional market segments. In other words, the “one-to-one” digital vision is effectively delivered alongside or within traditional segmentation approaches. In business-to-business settings, particularly those typified by high customer contact and customer adaptation, while the strategic value of these fundamental practices is well recognized, we also find evidence of social media and other digital insight supporting targeting activities and relationship building.

Overall, our findings suggest that digital solutions are an additional management tool to be integrated within strategic and tactical processes ([Brodie et al., 2007](#)). However, ambiguity over which organizational functions own and use these data obfuscates the measurement and assessment of marketing’s contribution. Even so, we find mixed results in the extent to which this is being achieved. Consequently, in the absence of convenient shorthand metrics, operational decision-making at all levels within the organization is compromised. In particular, the extent to which marketers can demonstrate accountability for the firm’s strategic marketing activity is diminished, an

essential requirement if the functional role of marketing is to be represented at the highest organizational level (Walsh and Lipinski, 2009).

Future research should examine the differing impacts of digital across sectors, so that a clearer picture of the interplay between traditional marketing approaches, and those inspired by digital, can be developed. A more nuanced understanding is needed of the extent to which the traditional and the new sit alongside each other, the relationship between them and the degree to which they mutually reinforce or are integrated. In light of the variations we found across firms, the extent to which this interplay is influenced by factors such as industry context, firm size, the nature of the customer base and the type of strategic or tactical projects that are supported, also needs to be investigated.

The evolution of marketing decision-making

The situation we have described has consequences for how marketing decision-making is evolving. In particular, we note a reduction in the voice of marketers in driving organizational strategic direction. Instead, we find an increasingly divisive remit for the marketing function and those who practice marketing within the firm, elevating a new agenda revolving around the tactical implementation of digital metrics aligned to consumer response and social media. To be clear, we do not see a lessening in the extent to which firms are market-led; rather, we see changes in which stakeholders are central to bringing this about. In this regard, there is further evidence of a threat to marketing's distinct organizational capability (Rust *et al.*, 2004). For some of the interviewed client organizations, the situation is both volatile and fluid, as other organizational stakeholders deepen their engagement with digital data, using it to strengthen their influence over strategic decision-making.

A central theme in this evolution of marketing decision-making has been the extent to which marketing channel integration has been achieved. We report mixed findings in this regard. Whereas the agencies we interviewed perceived such integration as a barrier for clients still to overcome and were critical of what has been achieved, we also found examples of good practice among clients and confidence that effective progress is being made. The strategic integration of other organizational functions including sales, distribution and customer service has also been exposed as a major difficulty in many organizations, further serving to diminish the strategic nature of marketing practice (Chari *et al.*, 2012).

Further research should unpack the relationship between data proliferation and functional/strategic responsibilities within the firm. Longitudinal case studies could help to pinpoint the changing roles of different organizational stakeholders. Studies which focus on strategic marketing projects as the unit of analysis could provide valuable insights into how these responsibilities are shared through the life of an initiative. Researchers should also consider how responsibility for marketing decisions is dispersed and the extent to which digital advances are altering where in the firm and how these decisions are made. These concerns are intertwined with the issue of accountability, as only through a more nuanced understanding of the changing ownership of marketing decisions will it be possible for marketing to demonstrate its accountability.

Studies are also needed which explore the extent to which marketing decision-making is being affected by the erosion of control over data insight and analytics that is evident in many organizations. In instances where market insights are

gathered at a distance from those who are responsible for strategic and tactical decisions, more needs to be known about the short-term impacts on measures such as customer relationship management, customer satisfaction and marketing control and about how these changes affect competitiveness and business performance in the long term.

A changing role for marketing in the evolving technological landscape

Finally, we sought to identify the implications of this period of *crisis*, *transformation* and *vision*, for marketing's role within the firm. We argue that it is not technology *per se* that is changing the way that marketing activities are conducted but how, where and by whom these activities are being carried out. It is, therefore, the discourse surrounding technology and organizational change that is shaping these shifting functional responsibilities (Postman, 2011). Once seen as essential to business insight and commercial survival, more sophisticated data analytics are increasingly being exposed for their inability to address strategic questions. Managers' interpretations of data, particularly digital data, are changing the ways in which organizations communicate and integrate strategic decisions. Among digital agencies and some consultancies, we observed a denial of the relevance of fundamental strategic marketing principles, such as the multi-layered organizational integration of key performance indicators, channel cohesion and marketing accountability, in favour of a narrative premised on what Arndt (1985) previously labelled as managerial *control*. On a positive note, most of the client organizations continue to recognize the value of traditional marketing practices and strategic marketing principles. For example, we found that normative segmentation practices maintain both a strategic and a tactical role in management practice.

Even so, we uncovered a range of operational barriers that impede both the strategic integration and functional accountability of marketing. Curiously, while the digital agenda that is creating these problems is in its infancy, the resulting implementation barriers are not new. Neither are they confined to the marketing discipline. For over 20 years, problems associated with internal communications, sharing of the strategic vision and data quality, have impeded the development of strategy in organizations (Wensley, 1995). Ultimately, while the digital agenda is changing the ways in which strategic solutions deliver measurable outcomes, the managerial implementation barriers remain the same. Old stories, but new narratives nonetheless. A more detailed understanding is needed of the nature and impacts of the barriers that impede strategic and tactical marketing activities – which barriers are the same as in the past, which are new and which are being expressed in new ways to reflect the changing technological environment. If practitioners can improve their understanding of these challenges, they will be much better placed both to anticipate and overcome them.

Concluding remarks

We conclude that the changing digital environment has potentially serious consequences for how marketing is practiced and for the marketing function as a subordinate domain of management. Our research findings contribute a current perspective to ongoing debates concerning the evolving and increasingly troubled nature of marketing's role within the firm. In a managerial sense, client-side organizations are authoring marketing's destiny by placing it in the hands of intermediaries such as digital agencies, agencies with their own commercial agendas.

Furthermore, while a digital marketing skills gap is clearly exposed within this changing technological climate (Day, 2011), the gap is widening – particularly within client organizations as internal and external relationships continue to change – and especially because efforts to integrate new insights are so far removed from strategic planning processes. Consequently, while our findings suggest that a limited group of sophisticated practitioners is adopting innovative approaches that involve detailed analysis of large data sets (Roberts *et al.*, 2014), this is not necessarily true of most, who are either not adopting such approaches or are out-sourcing to independent specialist companies. This situation raises the question as to whether there are important contextual factors behind this difference or, rather, another example of the phenomenon of limited absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) among the majority of businesses in this domain. Further research is therefore needed to align the strategic focus of academic research in marketing with the requirements of business and government research policy. The volatile period of social, economic and technological change continues to have a significant impact on the function of marketing, as well as on the economy, society and the teaching of marketing as an academic discipline.

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Further reading

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Appendix. Semi-structured key-informant interview template

Aims

How are strategic priorities in relation to targeting decided? How and in what ways is this changing? Who are the key internal and external decision makers and influencers? How does this impact on the strategic direction of the organization? And where does the "power" lie in terms of this decision-making?

How are these decisions implemented and what does the execution phase involve? What has been the impact of the digital era in this decision-making?

- (1) Project background:
 - Informants to be given an explanation of the project, focusing on brief background and aims.
- (2) Respondent background:
 - Their current/previous roles/remits.
 - Their marketing interests/experiences
- (3) Current target-market approach (RQ1):
 - Tell us about the markets your organization is currently targeting.
 - How are decisions made about these target markets? Please talk us through the process that is followed. Feel free to talk about a specific target marketing example if that helps.
 - What does the process involve?
 - Who in the organization is involved; who owns/drives the process?

- What information is used in making targeting decisions?
 - What other influences are there on the process?
 - What is the role of metrics and how is success evaluated?
- (4) Rethinking targeting and target markets (*RQ2*):
- How often does your organization rethink its targeting?
 - What factors prompt such a rethink? Can you give us an example or two?
- (5) How targeting practice is changing (*RQ2*):
- Compared with 10 years ago, how has the organization's targeting approach changed?
 - Who decides about the target markets? Where does the balance of power lie in the decision-making?
 - In what ways have the insights used changed? For example, the types of data used, data providers, providers of analytics and the parties involved in providing these insights.
- (6) Reflecting on the process (*RQ3*):
- What problems does the organization face with its targeting process?
 - How are these problems evolving in light of the changes described above?
 - Are some aspects easier or more difficult than before? Which and why?
 - What has been the impact of digital and social media on the process?
 - Is the use of digital and social media accompanied by particular problems?
 - How do you envisage targeting practice will change in the future?
- (7) Closing questions:
- Which other organizations are driving the agenda in this area?
 - Who else should we contact?