

The Evolution of Social Media Affordances and the Changing Landscape of Digital Marketing

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Abstract: Social media is becoming a growingly integrated part in people's lives and is becoming a new space for digital advertising. This paper explores the evolution of social media affordances and their profound impact on the development of digital marketing strategies. Case studies reviewed the platform-specific affordances of TikTok and a social media viral marketing campaign case of Mixue Ice Cream & Tea highlights how brands leverage platform-specific affordances, viral marketing strategy, and influencer credibility to boost consumer interaction and brand awareness. The research outlines the shift from traditional marketing to digital-first strategies, emphasizing the role of user-generated content, viral trends, and platform-specific design in shaping marketing outcomes. Additionally, it addresses key challenges such as the difficulty in measuring conversion rates, maintaining brand consistency, and adapting to platform regulations. Through reviewing literature regarding the definition of affordance and the evolution of social media, it is concluded that modern social media are emotionally connective and algorithmic. The paper concludes by stressing the importance of contextual, high-quality and consistent content creation in social media marketing.

Keywords: Digital marketing, social media marketing, affordances, viral marketing

1. Introduction

Social media has become a growing integrated part of the everyday life of everyone in this digital era. The mass availability of digital infrastructures and the rapid development of social media have created a new digital channel through which the companies are able to reach mass audiences. According to a datareportal.com report, social media advertising is becoming the primary channel through which people aged 16 through 44 gain awareness of brands, products and services [1]. Social media marketing (SMM) is also becoming a growingly popular field of interest for researchers. Recent research reveals an approximately 15% annual increase in the SMM research and famous brands' active engagement in social media as a cost-efficient means to engage with customers [2]. By navigating industrial reports and existing research, in combination with analysis against specific cases, this research aims to reveal a general trend in the development of SMM and the common strategies that brands adopt to augment sales performance or brand awareness.

2. Evolution of social media affordances

The affordance of social media is defined as the features or designs of a platform that enable or create a responsive, fitting environment for users to perform certain actions [3]. The affordance of social media platforms is not a purposefully designed usage or guideline for targeted users to follow; instead, it is perceived usage or users' developed use of the technology, focusing on the interactive nature between users and the technical aspects of the platform. The importance of understanding the affordance is the key to understanding how social media user size has been experiencing stable growth as well as companies' advertising investment on social media [1].

The development of social media reflects an evolution in the affordances of social media. Researchers from Technological University Dublin conclude that the origin of social media is the text-only message exchanging software, such as MUD and BBS [4]. The availability of the World Wide Web later introduced ethnic-group based social websites or public instant-messaging platforms and forums, through which netizens are not only restricted to connecting with other individuals but also advertising ideas to mass audiences, such as engaging online discussion forums and building public policy advocacy websites.

Entering the 21st century, development of social media experienced a great impact from globalization and the mass deployment of Internet technologies, and businesses started to notice the sales enhancement brought by advertising and distributing promotions via public blogs. The improvement in the technologies has enabled various formats of content other than text-messaging to be spread across social media platforms. YouTube and Twitter are both paragons as the former built the world's largest video sharing platform and the latter first introduced the function of mutual-following and allowing for publishing long text messages up to 140 words.

It is also concluded that the first instance of viral shares or viral distribution (mass, rapid, spontaneous re-distribution of content) of content happened on YouTube during this period [4]. A YouTube featuring adorable kids unintentionally went viral and yielded more than 1 million royalty income and approximately 850 million clicks. This particular case reveals the prodigious power of social media as a means of marketing too, whether for celebrities, businesses or advocates as the contents are able to reach and resonate with a great number of audiences unseen in other traditional media.

3. Digital marketing, consumer engagement in the social media era

Observing the fact that the Internet-based digital space has become a core component of modern consumers' space, it is clear to the brands that a transformation of marketing from the traditional, offline setting to the new digital setting [1-5]. Globally, steadily increased screen time spent per day indicates how consumers are shifting attention from traditional media and devoting more energy to their online experience. In Indonesia, specifically, a 2019 research finds that nearly 50% of customers search products online before making purchase decisions, showing how the digital space has become a primary information source of modern consumers [6]. This trend of the growingly digitized lifestyle, along with globalization, poses both challenges and opportunities to the brands in terms of maintaining active consumer bases and augmenting brand awareness.

Differ from the traditional, physical means of advertising, such as billboard ads, pamphlets or commercials on TV and radios, the interactive nature of social media enables the brands to interact with consumers [5]. The interactive, instead of one-way delivery of information through social media helps create a sense of social bonding between brands and consumers [6]. In addition, social media provides a convenient channel of distributing information, showing its cost-efficiency. Thus, the brands are pressed to attain skills to effectively leverage the affordances of social media in order to optimize social media campaign strategies.

One of the most imperative features of modern social media is its algorithm, and personalized content recommendations derived from the algorithms. The logic behind the social media algorithm design is to encourage maximized user engagement by labeling and prioritizing content that may interest the users [7]. The algorithm predicts users' preferences based on users' cumulated data, or the digital footprint, generated on the platform and summarizing the clues or topics related to them. Then, the algorithm pulls contents with similar clues from the pool of all the information, generating a unique feed for each user. Even for users who do not actively create and interact with contents, preference can still be predicted on other quantitative metrics, such as the duration time users spend on different types of content. From the social media platforms' end, an engagement-maximizing algorithm helps the platforms to make a profit by boosting the exposure of advertisements to the enormous user base.

The algorithmic features of different social media platforms may differ based on the goals of the platform, while human intervention may also play a role in the process of identifying, sorting, or even creating contents [7]. For example, Facebook prioritizes "friends and family", which dictates its algorithmic prioritization of contents generated by users' close connections, while other platforms may prioritize global business trends, political events over personal connections [7].

Hence, the affordances of social media, due to the differentiation of algorithmic design, may differ, sufficing specialized needs of people. The need for a social media marketing strategy therefore requires specialized design for each of the major social media platforms. The algorithmic features also enable other digital marketing strategies to be applied to social media platforms, such as the Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which aims to gain high exposure from users' searching results [5]. Besides, traditional channels of advertising, new social-media-based marketing strategies, such as influencer marketing, as a growing means of SMM, has also demonstrated great potential in promoting sales or augmenting brand awareness, its effectiveness will also be discussed in the form of a case analysis in the following sections.

4. Case study 1: Douyin/TikTok emotional engagement with users

Douyin, or Chinese domestic version of TikTok, is a social media platform featuring mainly short videos, has shown enormous potential in influencing users' consuming decisions [8]. Researchers from China conducted a questionnaire experiment via professional online data collection platforms with a sample size of 500 volunteers, concluded that the restaurants exploration videos produced by credible Douyin short video vloggers positively impact the audiences' intention to visit the restaurants being explored by the vloggers.

The research indicates that the video-format contents provide Douyin audiences with ample visual information of the restaurants, contributing to the buildup of the audiences' holistic impression of the spots. The visual image of restaurants conveyed through the vloggers effectively reduced the impact of uncertainty on the consumers' visiting intentions. In addition, Douyin vloggers' credibility, composed of vloggers' perceived trustworthiness, relevant knowledge, personal attractiveness, ability to resonate or echo with users (similarity with audience), is combined as a mediator to help the audience establish an ex-ante awareness of tastes toward the restaurant [8]. This reveals how social media influencers and the social media play a pivotal role in embellishing brand image through affecting social media users' psychological perceptions, more than the textual element of the contents.

The case of Douyin vloggers' impact on users' restaurant visiting intentions raised attention to how such a platform can engage with users in an effective way, more than fulfilling the need of acquiring information. A field study engaging with U.K TikTok users demonstrates how the affordance of TikTok tends to be interpreted by users as escaping from social responsibilities and enriching their existing social relationships [3]. In the study, the researcher interviewed several TikTok users and observed how TikTok is viewed as a common or necessary component of users'

lives for the platform's ability to personalize users' interests and give them a sense of relaxation. Apart from other social media, interviewees in the research specifically commented scrolling TikTok as a relatable and familiar experience, in contrast to the formal, or polished contents on the other media. These features describe TikTok/Douyin or alike types of short video social media as a platform where reassurance, relaxation, and social enrichment are perceived by users as the affordances, reminding campaigners of the apropos design of strategies.

5. Case study 2, Mixue Ice & Tea: viral marketing in brand awareness augmentation

Viral marketing, as featured by the viral dissemination of brand information through the sharing behavior of online audiences, is another key channel through which the brands establish brand image and brand identity, familiarity among potential customers or inter-connected social groups at a relatively low budget [9-10]. The concept of viral marketing is closely related to the brands' word-of-mouth marketing (WOM) and the buildup of brand awareness [10]. This section of the paper analyzes how a Chinese-origin beverage brand, Mixue Ice Cream and Tea (Mixue) or the Honey Snow Ice City, enhances customers' purchasing intention via viral marketing methods.

A paper published in the 2024 9th International Conference on Social Sciences and Economic Development summarizes Mixue's social media viral marketing scheme as the creation of trending hashtags or visual icons, identity of the brand rather than the promotion of Mixue products [11]. In 2018, Mixue published its visual brand IP, a virtual snowman-like character named Snow King, wearing a red cape and holding an ice cream scepter. Mixue soon marketed this brand image to Chinese major social media by opening a public account for Snow King and updating contents in response to the trending topics on social media, such as posting videos of Snow King being scorched to black to participate in the broader Internet discussion of recent heat waves [11]. In 2021, Mixue created its brand's theme song. With only 2 sentences of simple and thus memorable lyrics and a catchy rhyme adopted from a traditional U.S folk song, *Oh! Susanna*, this theme song soon went viral on the Chinese Internet and has been translated into multiple other languages. In addition, Mixue continued to boost discussion around its brand and the derivation of contents via collaborating with influencers and holding events at each outlet featuring the image of Snow King to intrigue customers' sharing on social media related to Mixue. Globally, research has found that the creation of recreational contents by Mixue via social media, such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook have increased consumers' visitation intention and effectively reaches out to the young sector of the population [12].

The social media marketing campaign of Mixue is a classic example of a brand leveraging the algorithmic feature of prioritizing entertaining contents and boosting users' sharing behavior to augment its brand awareness and consumers' intention to visit. In many ways, Mixue's social media viral marketing fits into researcher Wilert Puriwat and Suchart Tripopsakul's conceptual framework of viral marketing, in that the contents are not highly commercial and showing promotional intent [10]. Leaning more on the entertaining elements or the richness, uniqueness of the content than direct advertising on social media thereby motivates users' sharing behavior, creation of related contents (user-generated contents) and visiting intention. Huajia Zhang and Phanasan Kohsuwan's research applying structural equation modeling on volunteers in Nanjing, China regarding Mixue has also concluded a positive impact of social media marketing on brand awareness and consumer trust [13].

Mixue's social media viral marketing campaign shows that a well-designed social media campaign is able to retain high exposure on social media, boosting especially young social media users' brand awareness and visiting intention. However, it is also worth noting that Mixue's online campaign is accompanied by offline promotional activities and its accumulated WOM among customers plus other potential competitive advantages within the food and beverage industry.

6. Challenges of digital marketing

Besides the discussed merits of social media marketing, there are constraints preventing a social media campaign from successfully translating the success of the brand. First of all, there is a lack of measure to assess how the engagement and awareness of users on social media convert into purchases and brand loyalty. A 2017 study reports 71% of the interviewed customers express that “liking” a brand’s content does not make buying from the brand more probable, showing the technical challenges in tracking, assessing and interpreting SMM performances [14]. Secondly, the high exposure and viralness brought by social media challenge the brands’ ability to manage their public image and their consistency in producing high-quality contents. Though social media appears to be a cost-effective means of marketing, the negative perception of a brand message by the audience can significantly impair the brand, even for brands with high equity [10]. Lastly, the black-box nature of social media algorithms and the potential legal restrictions or privacy concerns may also hinder the brands’ ability to optimize their SMM strategies.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of social media affordances has significantly transformed digital marketing, shifting it from traditional, one-way promotion to interactive, algorithm-driven engagement. This paper has shown how platforms like TikTok/Douyin and brands such as Mixue effectively leverage platform-specific affordance, viral marketing strategy, and influencer credibility to boost brand awareness and influence consumer behavior. These cases highlight how short-form, entertaining content and relatable messaging are key to connecting with modern audiences. Despite its advantages, digital marketing faces challenges, such as difficulty in measuring conversion from engagement to purchase, managing viral content, and navigating algorithmic opacity and platform restrictions. These limitations suggest a need for more refined tools to evaluate campaign effectiveness and long-term brand impact. This paper engages mainly in reviewing existing studies and case analysis and does not involve quantitative analysis. A potential data analysis of the comparison between social media marketing and conventional means of advertising and a data analysis across social media platforms can be conducted for a better quantitative and comparative understanding. Future research should aim to better link social media engagement with actual consumer behavior and explore how emerging technologies like AR and AI may shape the next phase of digital marketing.

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