



Consumer Power: Evolution in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The predictions of growing consumer power in the digital age that predated the turn of the century were fueled by the rise of the Internet, then reignited by social media. This article explores the intersection of consumer behavior and digital media by clearly defining consumer power and empowerment in Internet and social media contexts and by presenting a theoretical framework of four distinct consumer power sources: demand-, information-, network-, and crowd-based power. Furthermore, we highlight technology's evolutionary role in the development of these power sources and discuss the nature of shifts in power from marketers to consumers in terms of each source. The framework organizes prior marketing literature on Internet-enabled consumer empowerment and highlights gaps in current research. Specific research questions are elaborated for each source of power outlining the agenda for future research areas.

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Introduction

At the dawn of the Internet, scholars began predicting a shift in power from the marketer to the consumer, suggesting a new form of consumer–firm relationship (Bakos 1991; Deighton and Kornfeld 2009; Kozinets 1999; Levine et al. 2000; Shipman 2001). With the introduction of the World Wide Web, ordinary consumers gained access to vast amounts of information and developed opportunities to influence their own lives, in the marketplace and beyond. The social media landscape of ubiquitous connectivity, enabled through mobile devices, in turn has not only enhanced access to information but also allowed consumers to create content and amplify their voices, across the globe, to anyone willing to listen.

Some predictions of the effects of these changes have come to fruition; others have rotted on the vine. This article examines the intersection of digital media and consumer behavior to gain insights into consumer empowerment and set the agenda for further research. Specifically, we explore whether the predicted power shift actually has occurred, examine its origins and nature, and discuss its potential trajectory. This research contributes to existing marketing literature by offering a framework that integrates various expressions of consumer behavior in digital media and links them to forms of consumer power. The framework provides the structure for this article, which seeks to contribute in three ways. First, we organize a fragmented body of literature by linking consumer digital media participation with evolving sources of power. Second, we highlight gaps in existing literature related to defining and explaining the mechanisms that underlie consumer empowerment. Third, our framework establishes a basis for identifying routes of investigation related to questions of consumer power, empowerment, and potential disempowerment.

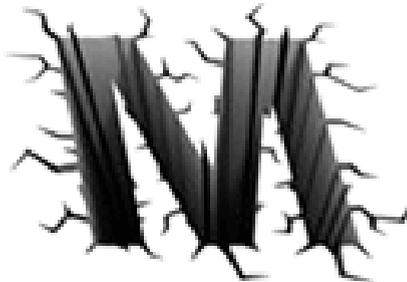
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