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# Guest editorial: The dark side of social media: EMAC-EJM special issue

Guest editorial

369

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With over 3 billion active social media users and a global penetration rate of 50.3% (Statista, 2021), social media platforms have become one of the defining technologies of our time (Appel *et al.*, 2020). Originally created as marketing communication tools, the emergence of social media platforms has had broad positive effects on consumers and society. They influence the way we interact and relate to others, build our identity and reputation, create, consume and share content, and perceive the world around us. Kaplan and Haenlein (2012) described the emergence of social media as “re-transform[ing] the internet to what it was initially created for – a platform to facilitate information exchange between its users.” Consequently, the social media phenomenon has attracted significant interest from both practitioners and academics, all striving to develop a deeper understanding of the various ways social media affects individuals, organizations and society.

Most early research documented the benefits of social media use. Social media platforms allow people to significantly expand the geographical range of their active social connections and maintain these connections for a much longer time (Mukherjee, 2018). They also enable authentic self-expression, associated with greater subjective well-being (Bailey *et al.*, 2020) and mobilize people around social or political objectives, prompting authoritarian regimes to try and restrict the operation of social media (Zhuravskaya *et al.*, 2020). The emergence of social media platforms has also created opportunities for consumers to engage in open dialogue with brands and organizations, allowing marketers to use online communities and their conversations as part of the process of value co-creation (Fuduric, 2016).

More recently, there has been a surge in research exploring the dark side of social media. Several authors have commented on the potential or actual detrimental ways in which these platforms affect private, professional, and social life (Boroon *et al.*, 2021; Fox and Moreland, 2015). This theme is the focus of the special issue on “The Dark Side of Social Media,” the first result of the collaboration between the *European Journal of Marketing* and the *European Marketing Academy* (EMAC). EMAC is a flourishing academic community with over 1,000 members across all subdivisions of marketing. Social media in marketing is an important research stream among EMAC members, with a special interest group and a dedicated competitive paper track on digital and social media marketing at the EMAC annual conference. Several papers in this special issue have been co-authored by participants in recent EMAC conferences and special interest group activities. Most authors work in Europe, but the issue features contributions from all over the globe, including North and South America, India, Japan and Australia.

Research into the dark side of social media use is still in its infancy, and much of the prior work has been descriptive, answering “what” questions rather than “how” or “why” questions, which is particularly useful early in the development of a research stream (Alba, 2012). Several interesting papers in this special issue are of this nature. They systematically describe and categorize phenomena related to the negative consequences of social media use or industry and institutional responses to them.

Several papers in this issue document the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in social media, serving as useful starting points for further research studying how consumers are



affected by interacting with AI through social media platforms. Using an ethnographic approach, *Alabed, Javornik, Gregory-Smith and Casey* describe four different relationships that consumers forge with their conversational AI agents, differing in self-congruence and self-AI integration. In a conceptual paper, *Mouritzen, Penttinen and Pedersen* outline the opportunities and threats associated with the use of AI-driven virtual influencers in social media, developing a typology based on the level of realism and anthropomorphization manifested in the influencer's appearance. *Blösser and Wehrauch* document consumer perceptions of fair, accountable, transparent and explainable AI in social media and other domains.

Other descriptive work in this issue examines current common social media practices. *Ares, Alcaire, Gugliucci, Machin, de Leon, Natero and Otterbring* report on the prevalence and content characteristics of Instagram posts featuring unhealthy ultra-processed foods directed towards 13- to 17-year-old teens, advocating for better regulation of social media posting by consumer firms. *Istanbulluoglu and Harris* develop a typology of falsification in online product reviews, based on interviews with social media users who post such reviews.

The other major line of research in this issue studies how social media use may lead to negative personal and social consequences. *Lervik-Olsen, Andreassen and Fennis*, using a structural equation model, identify habit and fear-of-missing-out as two pathways to compulsive social media consumption, documenting their respective antecedents. *Poole, Pancer, Philp and Noseworthy* demonstrated that while the total time spent on social media increased during the COVID pandemic, active engagement with social media such as posting and commenting went down, questioning whether social media can contribute to social connectedness in times of crisis. *Edelblum and Warren* demonstrate experimentally how men – but not women – who frequently post on social media are perceived as more feminine, and that it holds for regular social media users as well as for users identified as “influencers.” *Shezala, Jaiswal, Vemireddy and Angeli* study how exposure to influencers highlights discrepancies between regular social media users' ideal and actual self-perceptions. Using both qualitative and survey data, they document how users cope with these discrepancies. Using natural language processing methods, *Govind, Garg and Carter* show that during the COVID pandemic in the USA, hope-oriented messaging by political leaders was more effective in inducing compliance with social distancing requirements than hate messaging – putting blame on specific groups – even for leaders in conservative states. Finally, *Tan* documents how a preference for online interactions, together with false self-presentation, online disinhibition and compulsive internet usage, are associated with withdrawal from regular offline social interactions.

This special issue aimed to expand our understanding of the dark side of social media and consolidate a number of issues inherent to this field. The call was a resounding success: the 11 papers found in this issue resulted from 56 submissions. Nineteen papers were desk-rejected by the guest editors, and 25 were rejected after one or two review rounds.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the excellent reviewers, most from the broader EMAC community, who helped us put together this special issue. Without them, this would not have been possible. Thank you to Mohsen Akbari, Rene Algesheimer, Snehashish Banerjee, Jan-Willem Bolderdijk, Barbara Briers, Karine Charry, Daniela Christian, Bart Claus, Gert Cornelissen, Marina Dabic, Hannes Datta, Gwarlann de Kerviler, Patrick De Pelsmacker, Jasmina Dlačić, Rebecca Dolan, Matilda Dorotic, Jenna Drenten, Alexander Edeling, Antonia Erz, Bob Fennis, Raffaele Filieri, Tarje Gaustad, Maggie Geuens, Justina Gineikiene, Diana Gregory-Smith, Alice Grønhoj, Benjamin Hartmann, Anna-Bertha Heeris-Christensen, Sandra Horvat, Ana Javornik, Su Jung Kim, Tanja Komarac, Mateja Kos Koklic, Abhisek Kuanr, Gilles Laurent, Andreina Mandelli, Ben Marder,

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## About the Guest Editors

Luk Warlop is a professor of Marketing and Dean of Research and PhD at BI Norwegian Business School. He obtained a PhD in marketing (1995) at the University of Florida. He studies individual consumer decision-making and the social psychology of consumer behavior. His research has been

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Morana Fuduric is an Associate Professor of Marketing at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb. She obtained a PhD in communication sciences at the Università della Svizzera Italiana. In 2018, she received the EMAC Junior Faculty Visiting Program Award and spent six months at Northwestern University. She conducts survey, experimental and data-driven research to investigate antecedents and consequences of media consumption and technological disruption. Her current research interests center around computational advertising, data-driven marketing, digital platforms and digital media consumption. Her research has been published in *Business Horizons*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Journal of Advertising* and several others. Her work has been recognized with *The Journal of Advertising* Best Article of the Year Award in 2019. She is currently the vice president of Membership and Communication at the European Marketing Academy.