

Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?
That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.
I do not much care where –
Then it does not matter which way you go.
– Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Pandemic aftershock – the challenges of rapid technology adoption and social distancing behavior on interactive marketing practice

1. Introduction

The pandemic has impacted virtually every facet of human existence as well as innumerable industries across the globe. As of November 10, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports 5,054,267 cumulative deaths and 250,154,972 cumulative cases on its COVID-19 dashboard (<https://covid19.who.int/>). Some believe these numbers to be underestimates as they do not capture country level variation in reporting. The true death toll based on this perspective (up to November 9, 2021) is estimated to be 17.1 m ([The Economist, 2021](#)). The size and scale of the pandemic is therefore unlike anything the world has seen since World War II.

From a business viewpoint, [World Bank \(2020\)](#) reports that COVID-19 caused almost 93% of all countries to fall into recession, compared to 61.2% during the Great Recession (2009), 83.8% in the Great Depression (1932) and 70% at the end of World War I (1918). As a result, the global economy shrank by 3.5% during 2020, in stark contrast to the forecasted 3.4% growth in 2019 ([Yeyati and Filippini, 2021](#), citing the World Economic Outlook Report).

Given this backdrop, an important consideration for marketing practitioners is the speed and nature of response to the fast changing and emerging post-pandemic landscape. In this special issue of the *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing (JRIM)*, we seek to explore some of the challenges faced by marketers, who have had to improvise at a pace not previously witnessed and who now have to decide what practices to continue, what to increase and what to cease. In particular, this *JRIM* issue focuses on the impact of the pandemic on interactive marketing.

Some marketing practices and business models have been changed completely by the crisis, some rendered obsolete or temporarily halted and some enhanced or newly developed, with several innovations emerging on the horizon. While countless businesses have been decimated (e.g. high street fashion retailers including companies like Brooks Brothers (USA) and Debenhams (UK)), some have benefitted from the situation (e.g. Amazon and Zoom). Still others have struggled to adapt because of the Government-mandated social distancing practices. Consequently, human-interaction-based services like hairdressing, gyms, massage and dentistry have all experienced severely reduced footfall during the pandemic. Not being able to see the end in sight, marketers, consumers and policy makers appear to be on a journey riddled with uncertainty.

Envisioning the future and reimagining the role and provision of interactive marketing practices helps guide and inform marketers on how this journey might unravel. It may also help prepare the marketing world (both in academe and business) to address and respond to



the challenge. This special *JRIM* issue explores pandemic-driven dynamics as they relate to consumer behavior in an attempt to document new areas of inquiry in digitalization and societal innovation. These include the speed and ubiquity of transformed business and competitive dynamics, the role of (reformed) societal expectations and environmental factors and the speed, complexity and variety of technological assimilations (indeed acceleration) of the digital landscape. An important insight that emerges from the articles in the issue is that pursuing the same marketing models within organizations and maintaining the same delivery and engagement processes may be neither sustainable nor optimal for future generations of marketers. In addition, tracking the trajectory of digitalization stemming from the pandemic and the resulting marketing revolution through the many aspects of technological and technology-enabled delivery innovations is crucial. Some of the triggers of change will undoubtedly affect the role and the power dynamics of the winners and losers. Indeed, such transformation is following somewhat known but accelerated patterns. However, additional influences and tensions may arise from unexpected sources. We are therefore at a timely juncture to consider how the pandemic has changed interactive marketing activities/strategies/practice.

2. The papers in this special issue

The original call for papers attracted many submissions, but a number of suggested topics are yet unanswered and remain unresearched. Future research may work on investigating and developing doctoral dissertation topics around these unconsidered themes, some of which are listed below:

- (1) What are the new digital and social skills that consumers have had to learn during the pandemic?
- (2) How was the pandemic-evoked recession different from earlier recessions in terms of incidence and types of consumption?
- (3) How have pandemic-triggered scarcity, anxiety, contagion and cultural stereotypes impacted consumer judgments and preferences?
- (4) How has the collaborative sharing economy been impacted, especially given supply chain problems?
- (5) Which industries have been more or less digitally transformed due to COVID-19 and why?
- (6) What are the new challenges for artificial intelligence (AI), automation, smart technologies, chatbots, robotics, virtual reality platforms, surveillance and real-time location information in a post-pandemic world?
- (7) How have consumers' para-social activities (i.e. their relationships with influencers) changed during and after the pandemic?

Clearly, our focus in this issue on the relationship between the pandemic and interactive marketing practice prevents us from comprehensively covering such wide-ranging topics. Instead, we hope to generate ideas for future research as researchers start to uncover how interactive marketing practice and consumer behavior have been impacted by the pandemic. Considering the close link between interactive marketing and digitalization, these ideas are likely to provide a fruitful source of material for scholars for many years to come.

This special issue consists of our editorial, a set of three invited articles which underwent comprehensive reviews by at least two of the three editors and three double-blind peer-reviewed articles. In the first of the six articles, in a conceptual piece using the lens of utility theory,

Kannan and Kulkarni (2022) consider how customer journeys have been impacted by the pandemic. The authors observe that consumer behavior changes occurring during the pandemic are likely to endure, as the effort invested in shifting to online channels may engender a new set of habits likely to be resilient post-pandemic. The authors also explain how successful firms took advantage of this change by developing appropriate omnichannel marketing strategies. In the second article, Sheth (2022) takes a transaction-cost economics perspective in articulating how COVID-19 is likely to impact interactive marketing. The author cites evidence of many firms in arguing that interactive marketing practice will shift from a “physical first” to “digital first” paradigm and from “selling” to “serving” consumers, with concomitant impacts on the deployment of the marketing mix. In shifting to a “serving” focus, Sheth envisages fairly profound implications for interactive marketing practice, particularly for the customer support function of the firm. In the third paper, McDonald (2022) contributes a short and deliberately polemical viewpoint where he points out that the rules of competition were fundamentally reshaping interactive marketing through technology-enhanced means before the pandemic struck. He further proposes that the need for interactive marketing to be underpinned by needs-based segmentation remains in the post-pandemic world.

The fourth paper (Wang *et al.*, 2022) explores the impact COVID-19 on consumer engagement using Facebook data on global smartphone brands. They find that consumer engagement drops when (1) the rate of COVID-19 infections increases and (2) when the infections rise in the brand’s country of origin, and these effects are moderated by consumer animosity. The authors highlight how this phenomenon had a particularly detrimental effect for Chinese smartphone brands. Next, Kim *et al.* (2022) situate their inquiry in the fashion retail context and posit that certain characteristics such as interest in new technology, safety seeking and technology self-efficacy influence Generation Z’s preference for contactless service and that these findings differ from those for the millennial generation. The authors describe how contactless shopping (e.g. through using interactive mirrors, virtual reality and in-store mobile applications) became increasingly prevalent during the pandemic as shops mandated touchless or self-checkout kiosks. The sixth, and final, paper (Cho *et al.*, 2022) investigates the context of consumers moving online to receive technology-enabled experiential services. Based on an experimental approach, a key finding of the paper is that consumers with an independent self-construal respond more favorably to a persuasive message focusing on the near future whilst consumers with an interdependent self-construal are more persuaded by a distal-focused message. The authors argue that this fundamental finding has important implications for marketers operating in the prosocial consumption domain. In specific, they reference the observation that during the pandemic, how to place online food orders was more resonant with consumers than why to place online orders, while the opposite was the case in non-pandemic settings.

This eclectic scholarship comprising of both, conceptual as well as empirical pieces, encompassing both macro as well as micro phenomenon emphasizes the strategic as well as consumer implications of the pandemic within the realm of interactive marketing.

3. Digital transformation and post-pandemic implications

Interactive marketing which “as a concept is now included in the definition of digital marketing” (Zahay, 2014, p. 1) has come center-stage, as Sheth (2021) too acknowledges in his paper in this issue. According to Stone and Woodcock (2014, p. 4), “modern interactive marketing demands deeper understanding of customers and their behavior and how they like to interact with the company and its ability to deliver personalised experiences which they find useful and engaging.” Indeed, the pandemic has increased the need for digital interactivity over physical human interactivity as contended by both Sheth (2022) and Kim *et al.* (2022). Pertinently, a recent UK CMO Survey (2021) shows that the pandemic has

impacted the entire marketing spectrum, demonstrating that resources have shifted to building customer-facing digital interfaces followed by improving data use and new products and services (see Table 1).

In the next section, we explore some of the digital-specific challenges faced by marketing managers post-pandemic. Deliberate strategies, moving beyond the muddling through or pandemic-inspired temporary solutions, need to be explored. Marketers have been challenged to decide what processes to increase emphasis on, which ones to cease doing and what new activities to undertake and why. Intuitively, the first stage of the pandemic required a reaction, the second stage encouraged resilience and the third (forthcoming) stage requires review, revision and reimagination. We consider each of these stages in turn.

3.1 Reaction to the pandemic

Almost 30 years after the birth of the World Wide Web, we witnessed the rapid and radical creative destruction and widespread adoption of technological change with a surge in digital activity occurring in 2020/2021. Many technological adoptions and transformations that were expected to take several years occurred almost overnight, particularly in certain industries like education, retail, media/advertising and health. For many, this was a white-water rafting experience which had commenced before the pandemic, but which was now turbocharged. For example, Rust (2020, p. 1) argued that “artificial intelligence, big data, the internet, and the expansion of networks (are) creating a revolution in marketing that makes the 1960s style 4 Ps increasingly obsolete.” The main adoption areas of concern, unfolding prior to the pandemic, were machine learning, AI and robotics which had been heralded as imminent for a couple of decades. These grew and developed dramatically during the pandemic. Nevertheless, a lot of the digital spend was reactive or instinctive, driven by government public health policies. Interestingly, in many ways and in many industries, this reactive approach was successful. The need in the next stage appears to be to have the courage to maintain and grow these adoptions where appropriate and to discover the unique blend within interactive marketing practice. Evidently, even though we are still in the throes of the pandemic, we are at a different jumping-off point for further technological adoption.

3.2 Resilience during the pandemic

In the second stage, the rapidly adopted creation of a technology-dominated ecosystem across much of the interactive marketing landscape has brought its own challenges. The principal challenge going forward in a complex and dynamic environment is to ascertain what digital

Q. Considering marketing opportunities, what activities have you shifted resources to during the pandemic? (check all that apply)

	Number	Percent	95%CI
Building better customer-facing digital interfaces	90	78.9%	±7.6%
Expanding into new offerings, i.e. products and services	64	56.1%	±9.3%
Improving data integration to allow for end-to-end customer tracking	64	56.1%	±9.3%
Transforming our go-to-market business models	55	48.2%	±9.3%
Investing in automation technologies to improve virtual communication with customers	49	43.0%	±9.2%
Building partnerships	48	42.1%	±9.2%
Improving our research and experimentation capabilities	36	31.6%	±8.7%
Expanding into new geographies, segments	28	24.6%	±8.0%
Engaging in mergers and acquisitions	10	8.8%	±5.3%
Total	444		

Source(s): CMO Survey (2021) Top line UK: https://cmosurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The_CMO_Survey-Topline_Report-February-2021_UK.pdf

Table 1. What marketing opportunities and activities have you shifted resources to during the pandemic?

practices are relevant and sustainable. It is critical to explore how the changing modes of interactive marketing within delivery, consumption and communication among existing and new players will drive individual businesses to change and adapt. It is unclear, even at this stage (over 20 months after the pandemic began in March 2020), what approaches will succeed. However, what seems relatively clear is that technology will touch the customer journey irrevocably (see [Shadbolt and Hampson, 2018](#)), and for many, it is unlikely that the changes will be reversed. The paper by [Cho et al. \(2022\)](#) is instructive in that regard. It indicates that a different style of messaging may be needed (low construal as opposed to high construal) to drive prosocial behaviors in high-severity circumstances like we find ourselves in with COVID-19. From this perspective, [McDonald's \(2022\)](#) argument – that interactive marketing is highly affected by broader changes in the technological landscape – is compelling.

The world is at a point where we need to be curious and vigilant about the post-pandemic-interactive marketing skills required for success. The digital transformation that is beginning to root consumer behavior (as well as other aspects of an organization) is being accompanied by an industrial transformation as well. This transformation is characterized by some industries not being able to recover. Further, those that do will experience recovery and growth at differing speeds. Many are likely to face special and adverse pandemic-related circumstances like the Chinese smartphone brands ([Wang et al., 2022](#)). This phenomenon places consumer animosity and negative perceptions of country of origin up front and center as predictors of consumption decisions. The question then arises how might firms respond when faced with such circumstances?

Besides digital transformation, the pandemic has helped home working practices (see [Chen et al., 2020](#)) and online purchase behaviors gain traction. Consumers are believed to have vaulted five years in the adoption of digital technologies in only eight weeks ([Arora et al., 2020](#), p. 2), a contention supported by a recent [CMO Survey \(2021\)](#); see also [Moorman, 2020](#)). [Le Bon \(2020\)](#) contends that industries which suffered most during the crisis, such as higher education, can benefit if they move swiftly to rebuild their business models and value proposition based on the radical shift that digital capabilities offer. More philosophically, some commentators lean towards a utopian view and the idea of a social web of globally connected consumers, while others tend towards a dystopian fear of a global digitally controlled set of consumers along the lines of an Orwellian society ([Keen, 2015](#)). An ongoing concern is finding the perfect balance and ensuring that digitalization is aligned with human objectives and social welfare ([Russell, 2020](#); [Rai et al., 2019](#)). This concern necessitates a reimagining of life after the pandemic.

3.3 Reimagining post-pandemic

In this third (post-pandemic) stage, marketers will need to reevaluate, redesign and reimagine. It is safe to assume that in many countries, “non-interactivity and non-trackability will become the exception rather than the rule” ([Stone and Woodcock, 2014](#), p. 5) and that digitalization in the developed world will be completely embedded into marketing processes and practices. However, such a transformation will require marketers to meet a number of key post-pandemic internal challenges:

- (1) *Recasting marketing's role*: From a position of questioning marketing relevance and spend, marketers will need to recognize that digital interactive marketing practices will become the cornerstone for many companies allowing them to continue to trade and grow and are therefore a key component for the next stage of their development. This development will necessitate the marketing function to be deeply cognizant of the new levers of successful interactive marketing.

- (2) *Inter-functional coordination*: Well before the pandemic, marketing spend on IT was outpacing general IT spend by chief information officers (CIOs), with a shift in responsibility for IT investment decisions and actions (Whitler *et al.*, 2017). This trend has increased significantly and become increasingly critical to firm performance. This relationship between IT and marketing is of strategic importance (Whitler *et al.*, 2017) now more than ever. A recent Gartner report (2021) predicts that across the major industries, companies' IT spending will reach US\$3.9 trillion in 2021 as the pandemic fast forwards digital transformation (see Table 2).
- (3) *Integrated digital transformation*: Digital transformation is defined as a change in how a firm employs digital technologies to develop a new (digital) business model that helps to create and appropriate greater value for the firm (Kane *et al.*, 2015; Verhoef *et al.*, 2021) and is a forward move from digitization and digitalization (Bloomberg, 2018). Firms are on a digital transformative journey as a top management priority (Saarikko *et al.*, 2020) with technology, data, processes and organizational change as the four main areas for skills and development (Davenport and Redman, 2020). However, most yet do not fully comprehend what digital transformation means and how it works in reality, and many firms continue to believe that transforming digitally implies creating an online customer touchpoint with a few related and supporting activities. Consequently, the challenge will be to unite the many piecemeal digital solutions used during the pandemic to provide more coherent and *integrated digital transformation*. In other words, firms will need to move from setting up web solutions to touch customers in their journey (e.g. through omnichannel strategies) to potentially digitalizing each and every aspect of their functions and processes – including design thinking, human resource management, supply chain management, product development and even pricing and advertising.
- (4) *Business intelligence, consumer insights and privacy*: Over the past few decades, companies have increasingly been using data to drive marketing decisions (See Du *et al.*, 2021; Lamest and Brady, 2019). This trend is likely to exponentially grow given improvements in and greater adoption of AI and machine learning. This trend is aimed at improving marketing decision-making. It is also associated with concerns about privacy which may become more acute.

Based on a sociological lens, we are interested in how consumers will behave in different environments and occasions, which trends will be permanent or transitory, which will accelerate and which will be slowed or stopped (Mehta *et al.*, 2020). Many of the concomitant developments have been revolutionary and groundbreaking, providing increased

	2020 Spending	2020 Growth (%)	2021 Spending	2021 Growth (%)	2022 Spending	2022 Growth (%)
Data center systems	219,940	2.3	236,806	7.7	247,513	4.5
Enterprise software	466,647	-2.1	516,872	10.8	571,725	10.6
Devices	663,223	-6.9	755,798	14.0	778,949	3.1
IT services	1,021,187	-1.8	1,112,626	9.0	1,193,461	7.3
Communication services	1,386,471	-0.7	1,450,444	4.6	1,504,743	3.7
Overall IT	3,757,468	-2.2	4,072,547	8.4	4,296,321	5.5

Source(s): Gartner (2021)

Table 2.
Worldwide IT
spending forecast
(millions of \$US)

convenience for consumers and increased efficiencies for companies. Others have been associated with negative outcomes and have led to unequal impacts across cohorts and generations. A more comprehensive view is lacking but the focus must be on garnering the insight to use this newfound digital power and information wisely to support and enhance the human experience (Berners Lee, 2019).

Some of the questions that research needs to address are: Will this third stage improve the customer experience? Will data be used wisely and data-driven marketing decision-making help and allow marketers to create empathic consumer-centric strategies? Will these changes result in more efficient marketing decisions? A word of caution and conservatism is in order, particularly for legacy firms and legacy technology, as not all companies will or can adopt and adapt. There is also the very real challenge of the dark side of digitalization, with integrity concerns relating to the power, fairness and bias within algorithms and other inappropriate use which is becoming increasingly evident (Grandinetti, 2021). Also concerns abound at firm, industry and societal levels in relation to the power and dominance enjoyed by “big tech” (Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google (Alphabet) and Microsoft).

3.4 The human digital challenges at the consumer interface and internally

One particular effect of the pandemic is the effect of heteromation (Dholakia and Firat, 2019) and the accelerated use of AI internally and externally. “Machines do not fall ill, they do not need to isolate to protect peers, they do not need to take time off work” (Semuels, 2021, p. 1). Robots are now delivering room service in hotels, cleaning floors at the airport, guarding malls, serving customers as chatbots and even taking fast-food orders (Semuels, 2021). Lyall *et al.* (2018, p. 2) predicted the death of the supply chain, noting that “within 5–10 years, the supply chain function may be obsolete, replaced by a smoothly running, self-regulating utility that optimally manages end-to-end work flows and requires very little human intervention.” Indeed, we are witnessing the rise of automation and the demise of the human in the supply chain (see Lyall *et al.*, 2018) with a recent survey by EY revealing that the digital and autonomous future supply chain had begun in the earnest (Harapko, 2021) while being reflected along the entire consumer journey with numerous innovations. The use of augmented reality along the supply chain (Hilken *et al.*, 2018) or voice commerce and the effect on consumer decision making (see Dewar and Bendle, 2018) will have transformational effects.

Humans and AI will need to work together (De Cremer and Kasporov, 2021). As Davenport *et al.* (2019, p. 16) note, “AI will be more effective if it is deployed in ways that augment (rather than replace) human managers.” Open digital platforms will allow open interactivity across customers, suppliers and business ecosystems (Broekhuizen *et al.*, 2021a, b). An important related question is to what extent will currently emerging technologies and structures be used for control and/or to support the type of innovation marketers need?

4. Marketing’s enhanced digital and managerial role

Our need and ability to collaborate is becoming even more central and such a skill set will be critical in the new business environment (see Fehrer *et al.*, 2018). Marketers’ unifying skills and ability to internally collaborate and to manage collaboratively within the company and across the network will assume import for all businesses (Boudet *et al.*, 2019) and become key for executing digital business models (see Broekhuizen *et al.*, 2021a, b). Marketing’s role in many organizations has changed, with executives no longer viewing marketing as restricted to a line function. From this perspective, diverse areas of the organization – from sales and product innovation to finance, technology and HR – partner with marketing (Boudet *et al.*, 2019, p. 1). Digital transformation and marketing transformation are co-occurring (Kuma, 2018) and now could be the time for marketing to come of age entwining the best of interactive

marketing practices with the best of technological innovation to support and enhance business and society.

5. The road ahead

Marketers must ensure that they have the readiness in terms of knowledge, skill sets and vision to manage this digital transformation and the related tensions and challenges to reimagine interactive marketing practices, as digitalization and social distancing become even more rooted in the post-pandemic landscape. We view the pandemic-driven rapid digitalization as an exciting and liberating time for marketing and for marketing to assume the role of the driver of new and unique forms of business through greater and more compelling interactivity. If managed well, the pandemic era could serve as an opportunity to renew marketing's sense of purpose toward focusing the total company toward customer satisfaction while remaining cognizant of the triple bottom line – profit, wider societal and planetary responsibility (Kotler *et al.*, 2019). Marketing must contribute to society, to public health maintenance and improvement and promote human activities that facilitate purposive, goal-oriented actions for promoting the common good.

6. Comment on the reviewers and the review process

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- (25) Dr Amy Yau, University of Cardiff, Wales, UK.

Overall, we received 21 papers by scholars from a wide variety of countries across Europe, the USA and Asia. The degree of interest received illustrates how technological change has collided with COVID-19 to make the development of interactive marketing both more urgent and existentially necessary for many businesses. However, for various reasons, and unfortunately, it was not possible to publish all the papers received, several of which were strong in their own right.

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