

The History of Marketing Thinking About the Internet: 1990-2004

Sertan Kabadayi, Baruch College, Graduate Center, CUNY, USA
Gloria Thomas, Baruch College, CUNY, USA

Since its early days as an academic discipline, marketing thought has evolved in a complex and often non-linear fashion, adapting to changes in marketing practice as well as to changes in other academic fields. As outlined in Shaw and Jones (2004), the evolution of marketing thought has included a major paradigm shift and the development of multiple diverse schools of thought. As well, the definition and scope of marketing have undergone fairly dramatic changes, as have the fashionable topics of study and research paradigms.

This paper examines the way in which the academic marketing literature has dealt with a dramatically new and far-reaching phenomenon: the Internet. References to the Internet began appearing in the marketing literature as early as 1990 and have grown steadily since then. We now know that the Internet affects almost all facets of marketing activity and that it has the potential for even more impact in the future, yet there is little systematic inquiry regarding marketing thinking on this important topic. The present paper examines the evolution of marketing thinking about the Internet from an historical perspective.

The authors trace this evolution by reviewing Internet-related articles in 14 marketing journals from 1990 through 2004. They examine patterns across types of journals and basic schools of thought and analyze the way in which the articles deal with Internet-related topics. The approach stands in contrast to a recent review article in which Ngai (2003) examined Internet marketing research from marketing, economics, management, and information systems journals. Whereas Ngai sought to develop a scheme to classify Internet marketing research across a variety of disciplines, the present paper is an historical treatment that focuses on the academic marketing literature. This paper's historical orientation follows scholars such as Croce (1921) who viewed "contemporaneity" as an intrinsic characteristic of all history. Part of the interest in marketing thinking about the Internet stems from the fact that it represents contemporary history—a process that is still evolving. As suggested in the recent marketing literature with regard to historical method, the past includes events that occur today as well as those from long ago (Chandy, Golder, and Tellis 2004, 165). Unlike other historical treatments of the impact of

the Internet on marketing (e.g., Harris and Cohen 2003), our paper focuses on the impact on marketing thought as opposed to marketing practice.

Philosophically, the present authors follow Collingwood in assuming that "historical knowledge... has for its proper object thought" (Collingwood 1956, 19). According to Collingwood, the historian must concern himself with the question: "What does this statement mean?" rather than the question: "What did the person who made it mean by it?" (p.19). Thus the present paper takes as evidence not the content of the various studies, but rather the way in which they deal with the Internet relative to their subject matter. It examines the extent to which the marketing literature has treated the Internet as a subject of inquiry or a context in which other phenomena can be studied.

Our analysis included articles gathered in a computer-based search of 14 different marketing journals for the keywords Internet or website. In all, 194 articles were examined. The most obvious finding was a dramatic increase in the number of article published per year. More interesting, though, were differences in the types of articles and where specifically they were published.

Many articles focused on aspects of the Internet per se. These articles studied such topics as Internet auctions, Internet channels, (cf. Geyskens, Gielens, and Dekimpe 2002), or, as in the case of many articles in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, modeled Internet-related behaviors [e.g., estimating web site browsing behavior based on clickstream data; (Bucklin and Sismeitro 2003)]. These studies appeared to incorporate the Internet into the domain of topics that are subsumed within the field of marketing. Other studies, particularly those dealing with consumer behavior, used the Internet as a context within which they studied some other phenomenon [e.g., brand familiarity and advertising repetition effects (Campbell and Keller 2003)]. In these studies, the Internet was viewed as a context in which the behavior could occur, but it was not the direct focus of the research. Still other articles made reference to the Internet in their introductions or discussion sections but did not study the Internet directly. These studies tended to use the Internet as a justification for their research.

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Overall, the Internet appeared more often as the subject of the research during the early part of our analysis. Perhaps indicating a maturity of the discipline's treatment of the Internet or the increasingly ubiquitous nature of the Internet, studies that used it as a context tended to occur later. Additionally, the treatment of the Internet varied by the type of journal and the school of thought. Managerial articles were more likely to deal with the Internet directly, often in terms of its effect on marketing strategy.

Overall, the paper describes a variety of trends and themes, but, consistent with historical philosophers such as Berlin (1966), it did not attempt to put forth any law-like generalizations or predictions (see also Fullerton 1987; Savitt 1980; Smith and Lux 1993). Instead, the authors conclude by questioning whether cyberspace will lead to yet another broadening of the definition of marketing.

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