
Guest editorial: Beyond tech gimmicks: omni-digital touchpoints for products and brands

Digital technologies have evolved remarkably in recent years. They have expanded in number, scope and capabilities, thereby providing an extensive array of tools for brands in the swiftly transforming digital marketplace. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) technology plays an increasingly critical role in the digital marketplace by enabling personalized customer experiences, optimizing marketing strategies and automating interactions across multiple digital touchpoints to ensure consistency and efficiency. From extended reality applications like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to wearable technology, the realm of fully digital solutions presents substantial potential for brands.

However, many marketers still perceive these technologies as mere “gimmicks” designed to attract attention or capitalize on novelty. This perspective overlooks the opportunity to integrate these technologies into a comprehensive omni-digital customer journey for products and brands. Instead of treating digital technologies as isolated tools with limited value, an omni-digital approach would seamlessly connect various digital touchpoints, enhancing the customer journey in meaningful and engaging ways and ultimately enhancing the value of products and brands.

An *omni-digital approach* refers to the interconnectivity of the variety of digital touchpoints offered by brands to their customers and users. Thus, *omni-digital marketing* can be conceptualized as a holistic and integrated approach that leverages the full spectrum of digital technologies and platforms – such as AI, extended reality, wearables and more – to create a seamless and cohesive customer experience. While this term has begun to emerge in industry (e.g. [Rio, 2019](#)), academic literature appears to treat digital touchpoints more broadly, as part of omni-channel marketing (e.g. [Cai and Choi, 2023](#); [Calvo et al., 2023](#); [Confetto et al., 2020](#); [Gillison et al., 2021](#); [Hayes and Kelliher, 2022](#)). In principle, the omni-digital concept is akin to the omni-channel concept, which involves a similarly integrated and ostensibly seamless experience. However, unlike traditional omni-channel strategies, which often treat digital and physical channels separately, omni-digital marketing views all digital touchpoints as interconnected components of a unified digital ecosystem. We provide a diagram of omni-digital marketing in [Figure 1](#), which features an extensive, albeit non-exhaustive, list of digital solutions to be integrated by brands.

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An omni-digital approach provides customers with the opportunity to communicate with brands at any time without experiencing temporal, geographical or logistical constraints. The interconnectivity of digital touchpoints and interaction platforms has made the circulation of information possible, contributing to seamless interactions between customers and brands. With the proliferation of digital touchpoints and growing consumer preferences for digital interactions, driven by the convenience and flexibility they offer, omni-digital is increasingly embraced by companies, especially in service-oriented industries such as banking and insurance ([Rio, 2019](#)). By doing so, brands can better meet the evolving expectations of consumers, who seek not only convenience but also a rich, immersive and coherent experience throughout their digital interactions.

Adopting an omni-digital approach is now essential rather than optional. The traditional omni-channel strategy no longer suffices as customers demand the ability to interact with brands across any digital channel with ease and expect consistent, high-quality experiences throughout. Managing multiple channels while ensuring a uniform experience necessitates an omni-digital approach. In this framework, the focus shifts away from individual “channels” to creating a channel-agnostic environment where customer interactions with products and brands are fluid across all digital touchpoints. Thus, relying on isolated technological silos is inadequate; a cohesive omni-digital environment must be developed to facilitate seamless consumer interactions throughout the journey.

The promise of omni-digital environments and strategies for products and brands is immense. Take extended reality as an example: its market growth has significantly exceeded initial forecasts. Initially projected to reach \$1.6bn USD by 2025, the market reached \$18.8bn in 2020 ([Clement, 2022](#)) and is anticipated to exceed \$100bn USD by the end of 2026 ([Statista, 2024](#)). Even a one percent increase in the adoption of extended reality technology by B2C brands could generate additional sales opportunities worth \$66bn USD ([XR Today, 2022](#)). Other digital technologies, such as smart devices enabling access to the metaverse, show great promise for enhancing social networking, gaming, entertainment and multisensory experiences ([Dwivedi et al., 2022a](#)). Moreover, wearables, the Internet of Things and AI are capturing significant attention from marketers and consumers alike, with exponential growth projected over the next decade ([Grandview Research, 2023](#); [Nagl and King, 2024](#); [Watters, 2023](#)).

Consumers and brand managers alike are increasingly interested in omni-digital environments. A survey conducted in late 2021 among global internet users revealed that overcoming real-life obstacles and enhancing creativity and imagination were viewed as the primary benefits of the metaverse ([Clement, 2022](#)). Despite this, many marketers lack a fundamental understanding of the “metaverse” concept and the opportunities it presents for their brands ([Barrera and Shah, 2023](#); [Buecheler, 2022](#)). Additionally, only 35% of small and medium-sized brands had plans to incorporate extended reality technology into their marketing strategies, underscoring the need for strategic guidance in leveraging omni-digital technologies effectively ([Capers, 2020](#); [Kostyk and Sheng, 2022](#)). Numerous areas at the intersection of brands and omni-

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Figure 1 A Diagram of omni-digital marketing

Source: Authors' own work

digital environments remain empirically unexplored, presenting promising opportunities for theoretical development (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022b).

To address these gaps, the current special issue aims to connect products, brands and branding research with omni-digital research; set a research agenda for the newly merged area of products and brands and omni-digital research; and inform strategic decision-making by product and brand managers wishing to implement omni-digital strategies.

This special issue consists of eight papers which can be grouped into two main sets. While two of the papers provide insights into the concept of omni-digital through their focus on channel integration and its downstream brand outcomes, the remaining six papers zoom in on specific digital tools and technologies that can be incorporated into an omni-digital strategy from branded apps to augmented reality, virtual influencers and more.

Salviotti, Ieva and Ziliani focus on the role of touchpoints in driving customers' channel integration perceptions and their consequent contributions in building loyalty towards the retailer. Focusing on integrated interactions in channel integration quality and drawing on categorization theory (Mervis and Rosch, 1981), the authors argue that only certain touchpoints are significantly related to the concept of channel integration. They further investigate the role of different types of customers (first-time vs repeat customers) and product

categories (convenience vs shopping goods), indicating that the cognitive effort in information processing differs across these segments and product categories. In turn, this affects the perception of channel integration. The results of an online cross-sectional survey of Italian consumers provide evidence that customers develop a greater perception of integration from the touchpoints that allow them to gather information about the retailer as a whole (e.g. the mobile app in the grocery sector and the website in the fashion sector). The results identify direct and indirect relationships between touchpoint exposure and patronage intention while revealing the mediating role of channel integration.

With a similar focus on brand outcomes, Hanzae and Fathali develop and validate an omni-channel shopping value scale for academic and industry research. Their five studies conducted on Iranian and US consumers demonstrate that both offline and digital brand touchpoints offer utilitarian and hedonic shopping value, and offline touchpoints additionally offer social shopping value. As a first study that introduces a shopping value scale based on consumers' shopping experiences with omni-channel brands, the paper contributes to the literature by providing a useful tool for future studies in this area.

Focusing on a specific digital tool, Guzman, Nawaz and Nawaz study AR-applied virtual-try-on services with an aim to understand how these services add value to brands' shopping experiences. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model,

through a survey of Chinese consumers, the authors empirically examine the role of perceived usefulness and ease of use of virtual-try-ons and their impact on e-WOM and buying intentions through cognitive and emotional enjoyment. The results highlight that the success of innovative technology (i.e. virtual try-on services) hinges on the ease of use as it enhances perceived usefulness and cognitive and emotional engagement. In practice, consumers gauge usefulness in different ways (e.g. by saving time, facilitating task completion and helping with decision-making), and in fulfilling these needs, they remain cognitively and emotionally engaged with the technology, which in turn enhances e-WOM and buying intentions.

Mostafavi and Mavrommatis explore another widespread digital tool – namely, branded apps. Their review of more than a hundred papers published in the last two decades suggests that branded apps are markedly different from other mobile apps and have their unique impact on the brand, its financials, consumers, and more. They highlight the underlying mechanisms and moderators of these effects and recommend avenues for future research, with their prediction related to the escapism in branded apps being particularly intriguing. Apart from consolidating prior research on branded apps and proposing novel directions, this paper is informative for brand managers seeking to reap most benefits from creating and implementing branded apps.

Further investigating the technologies that can be incorporated into an omni-digital strategy, Wang and Yuexian explore the role of humanlike vs animalistic virtual anchors in live streaming. Using the stereotype content model and mind perception theory, the authors propose that animalistic virtual anchors should lead to higher purchase intentions than humanlike virtual anchors, mediated by perceived competence and perceived warmth, and that product type (utilitarian vs hedonic) and consumer need certainty moderate these effects. Three experimental studies using Credamo as a sampling platform find that purchase intentions toward utilitarian and hedonic products indeed differ depending on whether humanlike or animalistic virtual anchor is employed. These findings offer implications for the use of virtual anchors and avatars in omni-digital strategies, indicating that both product type and individual differences within the target audience such as certainty of needs are important in driving the success of virtual influencer marketing.

As the use of virtual influencers by brands is on the rise (Mouritzen *et al.*, 2023), Zelenskaya, Kholkina and Chesnokova examine the interaction of Gen Z consumers with human and virtual influencers through four outcomes – namely, source trust, intention to follow, WOM and brand attachment. The authors investigate the moderating role of novelty seeking and need for uniqueness. Focusing on West- and East-European consumers, their research suggests that both virtual and human influencers can build strong connections with followers. However, virtual influencers are less successful in achieving abovementioned outcomes as the social-psychological distance between a human influencer and a follower is shorter than that between a follower and a virtual influencer. The results also highlight the role of individual characteristics as need for uniqueness and novelty seeking tendencies reduce the impact of social-psychological distance.

In a similar investigation of different generations of brand consumers, Schapsis, Chiagouris and Wingate examine the

role that AR plays in retailing. The authors build on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology-2 to form hypotheses about how the habit of using AR positively predicts behavioral intentions toward AR use for buying footwear, mediated by performance expectancy, hedonic motivation and effort expectancy and moderated by consumers' generational cohort, contrasting Gen Z with Gen Y. The results show support for most hypotheses and confirm that compared to Gen Y, Gen Z's habit of using AR predicts their behavioral intentions more strongly. Interestingly, the authors find that hedonic motivation does not predict AR behavioral intentions for Gen Z, whereas it does for Gen Y. These findings can inform omni-channel strategies of brands targeting different age cohorts.

Finally, Olivieri and Hu investigate B2B brand building via omni-digital channels within the high-tech startup space. The authors use social practice theory and key informant interviews with 36 participants in a variety of roles, from founders and CEOs to other decision-makers and agents, to investigate the primary digital touchpoints through which startups connect with stakeholders. The results reveal several enablers of brand building, including branding activities and recruitment of branding specialists, founder commitment, development of new offerings, adaptation of communication and adaptation and integration of digital touchpoints. However, several inhibitors also detract from brand building, including a lack of digital skills, limited financial resources, lack of heritage/reputation, competition, high stakeholder expectations and lack of touchpoint control. These findings offer important insights for scholars working in the B2B startup domain as well as practitioners seeking to optimize their omni-digital B2B brand building strategies.

As a final note, we would like to thank the editor-in-chief, Dr Cleopatra A Veloutsou, for the opportunity to develop this special issue, all who submitted to this issue and contributed to omni-digital marketing research, and the reviewers for their constructive criticisms and timely reviews. We look forward to seeing how the special issue papers expand academic and practical discourse on omni-digital product and brand management – and, more broadly, marketing.

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