Digital marketing gamification and limitations of its strategic power: exploring the online universe of the consumer in critical contexts of political economy

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ARTICLE INFO

Article No.:112018162
Type: Review
DOI: 10.15580/GJIICS.2018.1.112018162

Submitted: 20/11/2017
Accepted: 25/11/2017
Published: 29/03/2018

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Keywords: Gamification as digital market strategy, addiction, cognition, crowdsourcing, consumer trust deconstruction, ethical/legal practices, cybersecurity of data use, critical theories of digital capital.

ABSTRACT

This paper is premised on the hypothesis that gamification is a digital metanarrative that is very susceptible to the sociological discourses of political economy. Drawing insights from the critical paradigms of David Berry’s (2014) critical theory in digital capitalism, Thomas Almer’s (2015) critical theory and social media: between emancipation and commodification and Hamilton, Bodle and Korin’s Explorations in critical studies of advertising, intersecting client culture and market technology, it argues that gamification’s rationalist assumptions have severe limitations when it comes to investigating digital marketing in context because it interfaces with the critical narratives of the online customer in ways which are complex. These critical customer narratives have to do with crowdsourcing, new habits and addictions of the online customer, cognitive/affective behaviourism, emotional branding, and deconstructive problems of consumer trust that relate to ethics, law and cyber security of data use.
INTRODUCTION

The game paradigm in digital marketing strategies is a formal language that describes conscious and goal-oriented decision making processes involving one or more players (Shubik 1972) based on the neo-classical economic theory (Herbig 1991), that every player has complete information; they know all the rules of the business game and the preferences of other players for each result. Every player has faultless information; they are thoroughly informed about all the choices foregoing the time of his decision. The basic assumption is that the decision-making process is one of rationality where every player takes decisions founded on maximization of her utility function. In the event of uncertainty, a player makes subjective predictions founded on probability in order to calculate the degree of his utility function. Every player is intelligent, rational and can accurately predict the choices of other players. She rationalizes about the choice she will make if she finds herself in the same situation of another player. Individual choices are competitive and non-cooperative; human behavior is founded on optimization of each individual utility function and not on that of all the players as a whole. Like in the prisoner’s dilemma, the noncooperative bias in this paradigm, means that a player’s situation and the factors of his environment are dynamic and changeable. Games are non-static, do not provide a single move solution and results obtained by each player are interdependent and therefore mutually-related with decisions of other players. In this way, it is not possible to make unilateral decisions. Results are affected by the length of a game, whose perspective is based on interactivity and therefore attempts to establish equilibrium between various players are futile.

The paradigm assumes too that it is possible to relate the economic definition of a game to the marketing decision-making process (Di Benedetto 1986). It upholds that a digital marketplace signifies a well defined set of possible ways of predictable action for each player; any player has well defined preferences within the possible results of the game. Relations and results are determined by choices of ways action is made by players and each player has complete knowledge of these attributes outlined above (Bacharach 1977). The choices about the marketing mix taken by middle management coincide with the ways of action of customers. A player’s preferences correspond to a product’s objective decided by management and relations and results are contingent on competitors’ choices in the market and the best information optimizes the decision making process. But the paradigmatic assumption of gamification rationality also embeds severe limitations for its enforcement in digital marketing. In fact, acts of irrationality dominate the digital marketing ecosystem (Chatterjee and Lilien 1986, Herbig 1991, Kreps and Wilson 1982) and constitute the differance (to borrow the term from Jacques Derrida) of the game paradigm as threat and ‘bluff’. Irrational behaviour is the real standard of the game market characterized by incomplete information, quests for reputation and not only profit in the game market (Kreps and Wilson 1982), non-determination of the intents of each manager in the game matrix and so forth. Hence, the game paradigm should be expanded to include incomplete information about payoff functions, information about intentions of competitors (Di Benedetto 1986, Chatterjee and Lilien 1986; Di Benedetto 1986, Cho and Kreps 1987), impossibility to establish equilibrium with incomplete information, marketing signals indicating preference of a player for a definite move and his possible reactions (Cho and Kreps 1987, Eliashberg and Robertson 1988).

Adjustments from the viewpoint of competition, interdependence and competitors’ interactions (Branderburger and Nalebuff, 1995, 1996), have been attributed to win-win games, beyond competitive scenarios. These “mixed strategies” are attempts to make up for the impossibility of obtaining complete information in the neo-classical model (Cho and Kreps 1987, Eliashberg and Robertson 1988).

In spite of axiomatic potentials of the gameification paradigm in terms of anticipation of dynamism, time, interdependence, interactivity and outcomes, marketing professionals hardly deploy the game paradigm fully in order to take decisions. Gameification in digital marketing strategies cannot define marketing issues completely; it clashes with marketing research founded on empirical measurement, observation and analysis of responses of consumers. Its validity in military warfare is very limited in the digital marketing environment where firms function, marked by unpredictability in competitive behaviour, the uncertainties of the marketing mix, constrictive managerial practices (Lazer and Thomas 1974, Wagner 1975, Tullock 1987,Moorthy 1985, Kreps and Wilson, 1982; Herbig, 1991) and the limitations of its methodological individualism, a historicity and formalism.

As Harsanyi (1982) points out, if a psychologist attempts to explain a player’s move in a game, he has to describe his behaviour according to a rational-normative approach or as an understandable deviation from it. In marketing, instead, the relation between price and objective quality of a good is not the main driver of consumer’s purchase. Intangible and irrational factors prevail on physical and price factors as determinants of consumers’ choice, for almost all the markets (with partial exception for a few undifferentiated products). Marketing functions not because the consumer is a homo oeconomicus; the consumer is a chiefly irrational being. In addition, managerial strategic choices do not have as objective to optimize profit or market share, nor are their goals same as the goals of other competitors (in terms of time horizons, reputation concerns, etc). In the real universe of the digital market, the cyberspace environment is not known and certain; the digital world is not completely knowable. Consequently, managers have to make marketing decisions with increasing levels of uncertainty. All the players cannot know all the rules of
the game, so complete information is not a realistic assumption to be exploited for marketing decisions. In different marketing games, results are not fixed but come as probabilities. Managers cannot rely on tools that articulate unsure results. In reality, competition prevails on cooperation. There are certain realities that are absent from the game paradigm such as the creation of a business’ image and its effect on the market.

Habit and addiction of the online customer

In the following section of this paper, we propose to show how digital marketing as a rational, utilitarian and predictable online strategy dialectizes into new narrations of différence and crisis, namely, a new culture of non-optimality, a site of undecidability when the signs are confusing, approximative and unknowable. We will show that, at this level, the marketing ethical line that skirts the process of getting customers hooked and hooking customers is erased. Consent is subject to psychological engineering (Edward Bernays, 1947, The engineering of consent). The digital media is now under heavy influencing of actions and attitudes through social media and smartphones. As a result, a lot of consumer data is now available on almost every aspect of consumer behaviour (e.g. preferences, quantification of preferences, contact lists, etc). The number of places where consumers can be contacted increases (e.g. home, workplace, car, everywhere else). In this space of in-betweeness, the time used per day with media devices for enjoyment by U.S. teenagers, for example, increases to nine hours (Common Sense Media reports). In the world, adults spend increased time on social media from 15 minutes per day in 2012 to an average of two hours per day (Social Media Week reports).

Consequently, a new digital ecosystem has emerged that is in urgent need of treatment of its addiction to social media and technology in adults and children and in need of adequate rehabilitation (e.g. services have emerged like Paradigm Malibu in California, reSTART Life in Washington state).

Human beings are not for the most part rational, profit-maximizing beings; they are mainly social animals whose brains are rewarded by gestures of connections such as smiles, compliments, hugs, embrace now replaced in social media interactions (e.g. likes, comments, retweets, etc). These new forms of interactions and social feedback, strengthen the effects of high dopamine that create excitement and draw in users to hook on each other 24/7 again and again (Ashlee Humphreys, Social Media: Enduring Principles). As ‘networked individuals,’ internet users are now going after online social capita(e.g. postings for emotional endorsements on Facebook when misfortune strikes). The challenge for our marketing organizations is how to persuade consumers not to cross the ethical line into addiction and how to return to that line whenever they cross it from their digital habits to addiction. Social media, iPhones, tablets and smartphones are clearly a blessing for humanity of today; they constitute a technology with positive power. Nevertheless, Aristotle reminds us in The Nicomachean Ethics that: “Virtue lies in our power, and similarly so does vice.” These platforms have also engendered dissatisfaction in the lives of browsers, who do not contribute to social media. They lack ‘self-control’ and have strong desires to involve themselves in social media activities because it does not ‘cost much’ to engage. Technology addictions can cause multiples of negative effects on adolescents and adults such as sleep deprivation, academic difficulties and failure, health problems, social isolation, compromised job performance, marriage conflicts, divorce and other impairments.

There are other addictions that may trigger impulsive behaviour from the brain system while the prefrontal cortex, is left vulnerable and unable to control inhibition. Digital addiction can transform into a social ‘drug’ as many studies suggest. The challenge for us is how to effectively address and manage this ‘dark side’ of prospectively harmful consumer comportment. It is very common nowadays to see people simultaneously driving cars and employing digital devices with the result that about eight people die and 1,161 are injured every day owing to screen distractions (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports). Phone snubbing during interactions with a romantic or marital partner, during work, in employee-employer relations, are now causing harmful effects such as divorce, suspicion of infidelity, lack of respect, unhappiness and subsequent moments of stress, anxiety and depression. Consumers click on several pages, they are interrupted by digital advertisers, brands like Microsoft, Twitter, Apple, Facebook and Google churn out products that are thankfully very pleasurable, various other brands release videos, games, simulations, notifications, posts, contests, images, commentaries, and messages, that are optimized by data personalization and are geared to absorb and transfixed customers into adopting ‘habits’ that may transform into ‘addiction.’ Addiction is compulsive, persistent, dependent and continuous with negative outcomes. The question of knowing the exact percentage (0.7%? 11%? etc of the US population) of users addicted to technology is current in different forums of debate but precision here would be counterproductive. The right question is to find out how brands are augmenting consumption rates in social media and what kind of best practice in marketing can turn an Aristotelian vice into a force for good.

With the rise of experiential marketing and the decline of mere-exposure ads in Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc, brand products deploy games, apps, video and content and draw from experiences to embed themselves into the psychology of consumers. At this level of the psychological, tastes and behavior change, and new habits emerge thanks to new experiences with the product, service or brand. As product, service and brand monopolize the instincts of the customer’s mind, her conscious thinking patterns, and even her unconscious mindset flashes, a psychological process triggers off that occasion a reward, an action and a
capital investment. Thanks to social media newsfeeds, interactivity of products, etc, brands spot out what initially triggers a consumer's emotions, and rewards him and then figure out what can 'hook' him. The brand is not merely what a company produces: it is now as well what a user crafts out through the content or data customers release voluntarily or involuntarily. By tailoring a platform to suit a customer's desires, drawing information from data collection and constructing sophisticated algorithmic profiles from his privacy, products become addictive and profit is optimized. By aligning a customer's action such as refreshing his newsfeed with a reward like a prize, notification, match, etc; in short, by paralleling humanism and digital technology, a customer's psychological vulnerabilities are optimized and this translates into addictive behaviour. The dilemma is that with innovative technology, the good qualities of a product/service have the potential to hook up consumers and, at the same time, addict them. Consequently, as programmers and marketers of brands, we have an ethical responsibility to help (even football, porn, alcohol, gambling, oh! yes! I know eyebrows raised!) websites, to assist consumers and companies to deal responsibly with the problematic of the fluid continuum of habits-leading-to-addiction. This must involve answering difficult questions like how much time consumers use online, prospects of behavioral modification, understanding how the human brain works, and so forth. Thus, while a digital marketer's task is to render a platform, blog, website, app, forum, chatroom, etc sticky (i.e. the habit component of the continuum), she also has an ethical responsibility to ensure that the consumer's health is not damaged (i.e. avoiding the addictive component of the continuum). This ethically gray space is a very delicate area: it is fluid with actions and attitudes like hardwired behaviours, routines (e.g. sleeping with aniphone, checking out social media information every minute), anxieties (with notifications, comments, etc), pretending to make calls or texting (e.g. to avoid a social embarrassment!), suspicions (e.g. using smartphone evasively in front of a lover who wants to know who is calling), phoning and texting during driving, etc. Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, etc also have an ethical responsibility to support digital marketers to pursue this task for the benefit of their clients' social welfare.

In this epoch of Facebook and YouTube, the building of brands is not as rational an activity as it was often thought. That is inserting brands in the digital universe, they go viral, they create buzz, memes, stickiness, etc. The belief was that social media would, in the gamification spirit, enable a company to mould relationships with customers thanks to great stories told and a brand will become a hub for a consumers' community. Although huge amounts of money were invested to realize this outcome, brands did not generate online consumer interest. Brands became less significant online because they succeed when they break through in culture. Branding did not work as a set of game techniques to generate cultural relevance. Branded-content strategies were not very effective as well because they did not comply with the consumer's crowd culture. As a relic of the mass media age, branded-content was simply repackaged as a digital concept. With the rise of new technologies, brands could only buy fame by competing directly with real entertainment. So companies like BMW created short films with production values and special effects for online viewers. These early digital efforts caused brands to think Hollywoodian creativity would engage audiences but new competition from online crowds came to compromise everything that was so obvious or was thought to be so.

In the past, cultural innovation was mobilized from the peripheries of society that challenged dominant conventions and norms. The mass media disseminated these new ideas but social media transformed everything. The social media brings together geographically isolated communities to collaborate by networking and substantiating their cultural influence. Crowd cultures may take the form of subcultures (new practices and ideologies), and art world (entertainment). Crowd culture may prosper around any issue thanks to social media that expands and democratizes subcultures, namely, clicks, and intensive interactions in the web, that push forward new ideas, practices, aesthetics and products and the art world of musicians, writers, filmmakers, cartoonists, and designers, that create collaborative competition: They work collectively, play off ideas, learn from one another and push one another through 'scenes' that generate creative breakthroughs. Crowd culture has turbocharged art worlds, thereby augmenting the audiences and the quality and speed of interactions. Cultural entrepreneurs now converge online to exchange ideas, fine-tune their content, compete to produce hits and hone their craft. Through cultural prototyping, instant data is acquired from the market's received ideas, are critiqued, and reworked for resonance. New talent is discovered during this process and new cultural genres are created. This pop culture is very adjusted to the tastes of online audiences and generated economically. Art-world crowd cultures are now the dialectized outcomes from branded content.

In lieu of branded content, YouTube or Instagram entertainers like Pew Die Pie, is a Swede who posts films with video games and commentaries and has 11 billion views, and 41 million subscribers. Pew Die Pie is a youth subculture created in video games. The videogaming-as-entertainment subculture of South Korea created a massive spectator sport, E-Sports, with a 100 million online audience. (Amazon recently bought the E-Sports network Twitch for $970 million.). Other gamers were Vanoss Gaming, elrubius OMG, Captain Sparklez, and Ali-A. PewDiePie represented the digital art world and gaming comedy became a new genre created by crowd culture. Gaming comedy such as fanboy sports criticism and girls’ fashion advice became an entertainment platform in popular culture. In these cultural contexts, brands could not compete in the
rationalist sense of gamification, such as brand investment, leading to buzz to conversion and then to optimization of profit. That is why Pew Die Pie, with its inexpensive videos has 408,000 subscribers and 3,771,940 views (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ydL73M-6Xk) whereas McDonald’s channel, a major investor on social media (#9,414) has got only about 204,000 YouTube subscribers. Red Bull spends $2 billion annual marketing budget on branded content whereas its YouTube channel (rank #184, 4.9 million subscribers) is adopted by crowd culture start-ups for less than $100,000 as production budgets. Coca-Cola’s Liquid & Linked shifted from the old mass media method of ‘creative excellence’ to branded content of ‘content excellence’ in social media and then to Coca-Cola Journey that runs stories on pop culture issues like food, sports, and travel. Its YouTube channel had only 676,000 subscribers and ranked #2,749 because consumers had faint interest in content that was churned out or desired in their feed. It was seen as spam or brand clutter. We can conclude here that Coca-cola needs cultural innovation by opting for a structural leap into the artistic universe away from the mechanical world of brand bureaucracy, that mediocrizes performance.

Crowd cultures hold up to new norms, which stimulate debate among consumers by innovating with ideology, employing female celebrities to challenge gender norms, creating rich communities around entertainers, promoting interactions through posts, pins, and tweets, reaching out to, say sports fans during games in real time, and getting insider photos from players after games, the running of chat-rooms and other direct digital connections. Crowd culture has impacted severely on branded content of sponsorships, but has, at the same time, oiled the wheels for a substitutive method of cultural branding such as in the Mexican food chain Chipotle from 2011 to 2013. Cultural branding promotes new ideologies against conventions of cultural orthodoxy. Cultural branding is based on cultural opportunities such as social disruptions that challenge an orthodoxy and causes it to lose traction. Consumers want alternatives, and innovative brands take advantage of this chance to embed such a new ideology into their branding categories. Cultural branding constructs icons by erecting new ideologies that benefit from intense customer loyalty. By mind sharing brands, brands are treated as psychological associations; for example, the cultural emotions and personalities are linked to the brand. Thanks to purpose branding, a brand may be presented in such a way as to marry the ideals and values that its customers identify with. Mind sharing may associate a brand with features like masculinity, sophistication, classical values, traditional spirituality, smoothness of a taste, like the whiskey symbol, etc. From this light, ads may mimic national brands, campaign for core values, masculine ideals such as via Marlboro models of the Old West. Stories can be told romanticizing a brewery as a lieu where men are really men; but cultural branding may challenge this perspective by drawing inspiration from critiques about, for example, industrial food anxieties, (preservatives, plastics, excessive sugar, GMOs, etc). Crowd culture prioritizes preoccupations with a social trauma which has become a public challenge.

Crowd culture may become a subculture that disseminates an ideology through films, cultural flashpoints, but crowd culture is about brands going after relevance, not chasing after trends. Consumers are not interested in the commoditization of brands, as gamification would predict, but in the ideologies that are considered ‘politically correct’. In the personal care market, for example, the image of the female model (curves, height, body poses, size, etc) has been challenged by a new ‘hipster’ ideology as urban subculture, through films on male attractiveness, cultural discourse about sexuality and gender and identification of ideologies that gain traction in crowd cultures. This model of ‘the mind’ flies in the face of economic models of utilitarianism such as segmentation. Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are platforms that promote the digital power of crowd cultures and aesthetics by leveraging into the power of the crowd.

Cognitive/affective behaviourism

In the interactive process of social media marketing strategies on teenagers, a series of cognitive, affective and behavioural attitudes were triggered in particular geographical areas like South Africa among teenagers and adolescents. Interactive social media marketing did not only trigger teenagers’ and adolescent cognitive, affective and behavioral attitudes, but these behavioural characteristics were also determined by additional factors like demographic variables (age, gender, population group) and usage (access, profile update incidence, usage length of time, log-on duration and frequency). The age range of 13-18 years (Generation Z) that can be found in high schools and colleges in South Africa is a factor that can generate different results from an age range of 18-23 years, or 23-28 years, etc. The point here is that excessive reliance on rationalism of digital marketing paradigms can be deceptive. Geography is a critical factor in digital marketing performance because in the case of South Africa, attitudinal responses to social media marketing communications are the most favourable whenever teenagers are Colored and Black, employed the social media for extended periods of time; and frequently updated their profiles. The type of social media used, the generation concerned, the usage and demographic variables, the age ranges, etc, are thus decisive factors in the case of digital marketing in South Africa.

Thus, away from the determinism of technodigital rationalism, prescribed by the gamification paradigm, is the form of social media deployed such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, Google+ and WeChat (Barenblatt 2015), the Generation Z or the Plurals, the iGeneration and the Generation Next (James and Levin
These factors which are not imputed in gamification paradigms, construct the drive for personalization of online pages, and this, in turn leads to events of interactivity with friends, the creation of user-generated content in which content is disseminated not from a brand but created and exchanged between users themselves and brand-related sources (Statista 2015, Matthee 2011). There is now a change in behavioural patterns (Nhlapo 2015, Uitz 2012) as youths depend increasingly on mobile and social channels to promote entertaining content and convey it to their friends via word-of-mouth channels (Yaaakop et al., 2013). There are also behavioural differences that are contingent on factors within and between generations of Millennials or Generation Y (Bolton et al. 2013), between and within these generations in different geographical territories (South Africa, India, China, Brazil, industrialized nations (Petzer and De Meyer 2013). Consequently, digital marketing tactics should be determined not by the technological ideologies themselves such as gamification, but by usage variables like mobile device access, generation, geography, etc (Peters et al. 2013, Hoffman and Novak 2012).

In order to minimize the theory of gamification and optimize insights from best practices the digital marketer can deploy, it is important to lay emphasis on cognitive, behavioural and affective attitudes (Bagozzi and Burnkrant 1980, Balabanis and Vassileiou 1999), by stressing on usage variables such as length of usage, log-on frequency and duration, access, and profile update incidence) and highlighting demographic variables like age, gender and social population, and elucidating geographical context, etc. The internet is not merely a technology of rationalist paradigms; it is also a social network which promotes consumer-generated content thanks to its embedded Web 2.0 technology, its influencer and word of mouth channels, its mobile platforms, etc (Meyerson, 2010). The intermixture of audio/video, podcasting, hyperlinked graphical imagery, and the imperative of consumer demand stimulation, brand consciousness, dissemination of information, construction of buzz and traffic; restructuring of brand/client relations and the need for service, communication, loyalty, leads generation, conversion, sales and ROI (Stokes 2013, Thomas 2011) have complicated the pre-eminence of gamification. Digital gamification intersects with too many factors of the customer: attitudes, online formats, advertising modes, cultural influences, questions of access to infrastructure, usage issues of speed, and so forth (Cox 2010, Tham et al., 2013; Malthouse et al., 2013, Gensler et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2015, Kumar et al., 2013, Labrecq; Luuka and James, 2014). Even within the geographical context of the political economy such as South Africa, sociological markers like multiculturalism, democracy, multiple languages, racial and ethnic discrimination, ethnic structure, levels of revenue, consumption levels, addiction levels, employment and education opportunities actually impact as inputs of the customer (Hermine 2014, Luthans et al., 2004, Luthans et al., 2004; Statistics South Africa, 2012; Petzer and De Meyer, 2013; Radebe, 2013; Shevel, 2013; Hermine, 2014; Du Toit, 2015). Thus, beyond the self-evident culture that is expected from smartphones, iPhones, iPods, iPads, tablets, computers, the internet, instant messaging and platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Pinterest, there is the human side of personalization of digital assistants, interactivity, discretionary income levels, picture sharing and video sharing attitudes, levels of creativity, expressiveness, individuality, brand stories and even mood that empower online socialization (Stokes, 2013, Heller, 2015, MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). Gamification enables consumers to screen messages of customer relationship management, advertising, and positive brand communications. Tham et al. (2013) reveal that word of mouth issues disseminated via social media were not as credible as traditional methods of word of mouth and choices and other scholars found a mixed range of factors which were founded on positive, negative or neutral attitudes, consumer perception, purchase intentions and so forth (Lukka and James 2014, Murphy 2014).

**Emotionizing the brand**

The emotionizing of brands is a current practice of constructing brands which appeal directly to the egoism, condition, state, necessities and desires of customers. By emotionizing brands, a bond is established between a product and a consumer by triggering a consumer’s emotion. All customers have needs and desires like power, love, security and so forth, which are founded on emotion at a sub-conscious level. Needs and desires constitute a basis for emotionizing brands and enabling digital marketers to construct a self-fulfilling prophecy from the perspective of consumer needs. Given that customers have desires and needs to fulfill, and digital advertisers constantly advance the necessity to fulfill them, it is clear that gamification cannot constitute itself as a thorough guide in the entire process of digital marketing. Thus a major challenge in digital marketing strategies is the difference (to borrow Jacques Derrida’s term) narratives of ambiguity emerging from decision-making models in the paradigms of rational choices which are, for the most part, sequential and cognitive in nature. The emerging process of emotionizing brands is not a rational one, because it also deals with unconnected things and processes like products, services, a client’s cause of grief, music, images of people, and complex connectivity attitudes.

A product may be linked to a person, brand or concept in a very unembellished fashion such as ‘Bliss is a brewery called coca-cola’ or ‘Safety is a family garden called Renault-Nissan’. Digital approaches deployed often embed the intention to construct an emotional reaction to an e-advertisement, product, or information in the sector of viral publishing. With mere exposure effect,
brands can construct an enduring relationship in the hearts and minds of consumers. But in order to construct a connection between customers and a brand, a brand has to depict a very specific personality with precise symbols and values attached to it. Storytelling also deploys archetypal emotionizing which taps into sentiments that cut across all universal geographies. Examples of such deployments include the hero archetype of Nike, that sticks to customer loyalty all over the world. Like everyone else in the world, the hero begins life from a humble background, defies a scary enemy, and against all odds, he manages to endure at the end of the tale. Nike draws from the morale strength of this emotional story of the universal hero to sentimentally charge its marketing strategy by turning the story inward. Nike’s marketing method consists in telling the customer that s/he is the/that hero (active, enterprising, smart, etc) and that the enemy is his/her lazy interior part that everyone all over the world identifies with as opposed to the exterior enemy that not everyone identifies with. Thus, a food brand may be associated with the perseverance, strength, and resistance of desert dwellers, as a way of stating that the food brand can be tested in terms of its mettle against the natural elements of a life cycle.

The archetype constructed here is that of a lone fighter facing the odds of life but with the support of food nutrients that are energizing, protective, safe and so forth. Although this marketing strategy may be considered as manipulative of human emotion, by ‘sameing’ products and archetypes, nevertheless, it is an attempt to differentiate the emergence of brands from the ‘spamming’ of ads churned out everyday. In addition to cognitive and affective strategies, marketers can also deploy subtle emotionizing appeals for consumers with elevated levels of emotional intelligence so that a simplistic association should not compromise or defer decision-making on the part of skeptical customers.

**Deconstructing consumer trust**

Although the game paradigm in digital marketing is ‘rewritten’ inadvertently by social media platforms and their associates, unfortunately, the limitations of gamification start to show up when a general criticism was made of Youtube, Facebook, for example, and their practices of consumer data collection. About fifty million user profiles were poured out to a provider like Cambridge Analytica, which was consistent with the rationalist, profit-maximization paradigm of game theory. However, this rationalist course led to a controversy because *economism* dialectized into a complicated *political* narrative of data analytics. This opened up new perspectives that should caution digital marketers on questions of consumer transparency, exploitation (in the gamification sense of the term) of customer information and good governance practices in the area of usage and access. Even though Facebook banned Strategic Communication Laboratories and Cambridge Analytica, from its platform activities because of the data leaks (Cameron 2018) and it was right to do so, that action dealt a blow to the gamification philosophy. It opened up a space of inbetweeness, a ‘location of culture’ (to borrow Homi Bhabha’s term) where rationalist economics devoid of issues of morality is in conflict with the legality of hypertargeting political activities and electoral principles like the UK Brexit campaign and the 2016 US presidential election. Gamification was applied in the accessing of data, the construction of a pool of consumer insights via a Facebook app, ‘this is your digital life’ and a personality predictions survey. Thus, through apps, and personality quizzes, profiles and hypertargeting of consumers, it became possible to impact on the political sector. These ‘rationalist’ actions of passing on user information by *economica* man were transcoded as violation of a social media platform’s policy of best practices. Facebook disbanded the app and requested certifications ensuring the data was eliminated. New discourses emerged about concerns with the deletability of data, responsibility of unlawful behaviour, legal questions of US senatorial and congressional committees, British MPs and commissioners of information, independence of forensic investigation and auditing, and protection of customer’s information.

Further narratives emerged from the data ‘breach’, based on how consumer behavioural data was being deployed to convey inappropriate content for consumers in all social media platforms. As a result, for example, Unilever came up against both Facebook and Google, menacing to withdraw its digital ads from both platforms if they failed to address the question of controversial content published on their online platforms and these threats spawned further divisions because of the fear that the digital environment had damaged the trust of consumers (Ibid). Consequently, the digital supply chain of advertisers was seriously affected under the emergency question of consumer transparency.

Although the social media platforms were responding to this crisis by placement of prohibitions on advertising and content producers, and some quarters felt they did not go far enough, other discourses that sought to re-establish gamification paradigms, argued that they had preoccupations with upshots of data treatment for marketers. Red Planet, for example, argued that consumers are themselves naturally inclined to protect their personal data and privacy and desire to control them. Consequently, the activities of the digital industry should be protected by data-focused customer marketers and brands that have to be transparent to ensure that consumers are conscious about the ways their data is being deployed. This discourse takes on a new signification prioritizing a new form of customer awareness that can enable them to understand the advantages of good use of behavioural data, namely, to convey interactions and experiences that are relevant to customers. At Red Planet, insights and data are anonymized, connected at a de-identified level and shared only with third-parties as aggregated insights (Ibid).
The discursive argument further upholds that brands improve customer experience when digital marketers access the right data and this is good for the consumer. Nevertheless, digital marketers have to be transparent in order for consumers to appreciate the latent value of their private data being shared. Thus, from the discourse on data breaches, there has been a major leap to questions of protection, with companies like Facebook engaging responsibility and obligations to shield customer data. The further direction of the discourse is the setting up of laws that are protective of data privacy and usage. The digital marketing and media industry must now learn the lesson that the gamification orthodoxy can easily decode into political economy narratives that go beyond data ‘breach’ into new perspectives of accessibility, exploitation and sharing of customer data. Critical digital marketers have a responsibility therefore to implement protective policies by monitoring what customers really do with data provided. Even critical marketers accessing less data must comply for the sake of managing ethically their customer relationships.

For example, when ‘peace data’ is deployed to promote a brand, the digital marketer has a responsibility to impact his activities on positive social change. Because there is no strictly definable guideline on issues of ‘permitted use’, anything can happen when data is shared publicly. Therefore, the major challenge for social media companies like Facebook, Instagram, Google, Twitter, Youtube, etc, that provide data publicly, is how to envisage every possible employment of its data well in advance. This is very critical because any lack of good governance practices on data deployment can lead to narratives like these political ones that have deconstructed customer confidence and resulted to loss of huge amounts of money for online platforms and companies. Social media platforms and companies can be assisted to rewrite methods of controlling the flows of customer data in and out of their platforms; that way, it is our responsibility as critical digital marketers to track down how and where customer data being shared is deployed and at what time scales presently and prospectively. In this way, access can be revoked whenever data is alerted to be abused and it can be ensured that data is not being subjected to unethical use with prospects of potentially harmful consequences. There is a need for a new kind of ‘hyper vigilance’ where authenticity and transparency are reconstructed with customers working in partnership with social media platforms connecting with them. Appropriate data policies should be put in place that can bring value to customers. In order to reconstruct their trust, customers will convey data only when they can volunteer it in exchange for real deliverable value.

The further challenge for social media companies is not merely how to hypertext target consumers by drawing insights from their behavioural data, it is also how to manage preoccupations that brands may control with potentially dangerous influence on consumers. Hypertargeting can lead to problematic practices with legally unauthorized employment of data, such as discrimination founded on conditions like sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity, media conditions, disability profiling (see Ndi 2012), and other conditions which are unlawful. Data buyers may lay out a plan on how they intend to employ their data, but the critical question is: do they follow those plannings? There is a need for a direct mail listing of seed records that can enable one to monitor how lists are being deployed so as to identify violators of agreement terms. There are sexual orientation, political, ethnic, racial, disability and religious data that are overly exposed to abuse in websites and this exposure often enables ads to target groups of people as found in sites of ethnicity, racial hatred, etc. Digital marketers are also consumers, who share data in exchange for value, such as saving money, time, enhancing life, facilitating life, making life more enjoyable, etc. By leveraging data that adds value, consumers will be encouraged to convey data, but at the same time, social media companies need to understand that the ‘just the platform’ card is no longer workable as gamification philosophy promises, they must engage seriously with digital marketing strategists of the critical school to ensure whether any personal data from consumers is abused in any way. In the last resort, regulatory laws can confer privacy powers to investigate interference with privacy data and can provide enforcement actions, undertakings, determination, or insights on applications to the law court for a civil penalty order to handle an infringement of a civil penalty provision nature.

CONCLUSION

When conducting a digital market analysis, it is important to remember that game rationalism is just one stage in the business planning process of digital marketing strategies. When it comes to addressing complex issues of equilibrium, ROI, investment and profit, etc, one has to conduct greater in-depth research and analysis before arriving at making decisions. A rationalist analysis of digital marketing strategies covers principally issues that can be seen as a threat, a weakness, a strength or an opportunity. There are always other issues of political economy to address in digital marketing strategies that carry psychological, cultural, legal, and social uncertainties, two-sided factors, and so on. The gamification of ICT marketing prioritizes functionalism and minimizes sociological questions. It is not about provision of solutions and offering of alternative decisions. It generates many ideas but the presence of multiple ideas does not give one an idea about what to choose, which idea is best when
dealing with an issue, etc. Gamification is about the production of a lot of information; however, it is not all of the information that is deployable and useful. These political economy factors rewrite gamification and can be taken seriously by critical digital marketing strategists.

**Sketch bio**

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