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TRANSFORMATION OF MARKETING CONCEPTS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Shyian Dmytro,
Doctor of Economics, Professor, Professor of the Department of Marketing
Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics

The conceptual development of marketing is conventionally presented as a succession of orientations: a production orientation gives way to a sales orientation, the sales orientation to the marketing concept, the marketing concept to relationship marketing, and relationship marketing to a digital or technological paradigm variously labelled Marketing 3.0, 4.0 or 5.0. Digital technology enters this narrative as the agent of the most recent transition. The account is attractive because it is orderly, and orderliness is what a teachable history requires.

It is also, in a specific and consequential way, unreliable. The historiography of the discipline has known for more than three decades that the opening stage of the sequence is largely a construction. Fullerton, examining conditions in Britain, Germany and the United States, showed that the notion of a "production era" obscures how extensive and how sophisticated marketing practice already was long before the sequence places its emergence - and he directed the same criticism at the sales-era and marketing-era concepts, not merely at the first of them [1]. Hollander and colleagues subsequently drew on twenty-eight well-known periodisations from marketing history, the history of marketing thought and business history, and showed that the identification of coherent periods depends on prior decisions about which issues and processes matter, so that era boundaries move with the criterion the author selects rather than marking self-evident turning points [2].

The relevance of this to the present is direct. If the succession model was unreliable when applied to the twentieth century, there is no reason to assume it has become reliable now that digital technology occupies its terminal position. The argument advanced here is that the influence of digital technologies on marketing concepts has been substantial but has been systematically misdescribed. It has been narrated as the replacement of one paradigm by another, whereas the available evidence supports a different account: concepts accumulate rather than succeed one another, and the distinctive contribution of digital technology has been to render an existing concept operationally executable rather than to supply a new one. Separating what genuinely changed from what was merely renamed is therefore not a semantic exercise. It determines whether the discipline is accumulating knowledge or accumulating vocabulary.

The succession model should not be caricatured, because each of its transitions rests on serious scholarship. Webster documented a real change in the position of marketing within the corporation, arguing that the microeconomic profit-maximisation paradigm had become inadequate as firms moved from bureaucratic hierarchies conducting arm's-length transactions towards networks built on strategic partnerships, and that marketing consequently operates at three distinct levels - corporate culture, business-unit strategy and operating tactics - rather than being confined to demand stimulation [3]. Grönroos argued that the marketing-mix paradigm had become a straitjacket derived from a manufacturing and mass-market context, ill-suited to services and industrial markets, and proposed relationship marketing as the emerging alternative, positioned along a strategy continuum running from transactional to relational exchange [4]. Vargo and Lusch proposed that marketing was shifting from a goods-dominant logic, in which value is embedded in tangible output and exchanged in discrete transactions, to a service-dominant logic in which the application of specialised competences is the fundamental basis of exchange and value is co-created with a customer who is always a co-producer [5].

What is striking, however, is that one of the most cited contributions to the sequence explicitly denies that it is a sequence. Sheth and Parvatiyar argued that relationship marketing is not an invention of the late twentieth century but a restoration: pre-industrial producers and consumers dealt with one another directly and formed relational bonds, mass production, intermediaries and mass media inserted transactional distance during the industrial era, and technology, the quality movement and channel restructuring were beginning to restore direct interaction [6]. This is a cyclical account, not a linear one, and it sits awkwardly inside the very progression it is normally used to illustrate.

A comparable tension is present in Grönroos's formulation. What he proposed was a marketing strategy continuum, along which a firm positions itself according to the character of its offering and its market, rather than a historical stage through which every firm necessarily passes [4]. Much of the literature citing him has converted that continuum into a chronology, which is exactly the operation Hollander and colleagues identify as the characteristic defect of periodisation: a dimension of variation is reinterpreted as a sequence of periods [2]. Once that conversion is made, firms occupying the transactional end of the continuum appear backward rather than appropriately positioned.

The deeper difficulty is that none of the supposedly superseded concepts actually disappeared. Transactional exchange did not cease when relationship marketing was declared the new paradigm; the marketing mix remains the dominant pedagogical structure of the discipline three decades after it was described as a straitjacket; and production and product orientations remain entirely recognisable in firms whose competitive position rests on manufacturing capability. What the historical record shows is accumulation, not replacement. Each concept added a layer of practice and vocabulary that coexists with the layers beneath it, and the resulting structure is better represented as a set of overlapping and persisting bands than as a chain of discrete boxes. Figure 1 contrasts the two representations.

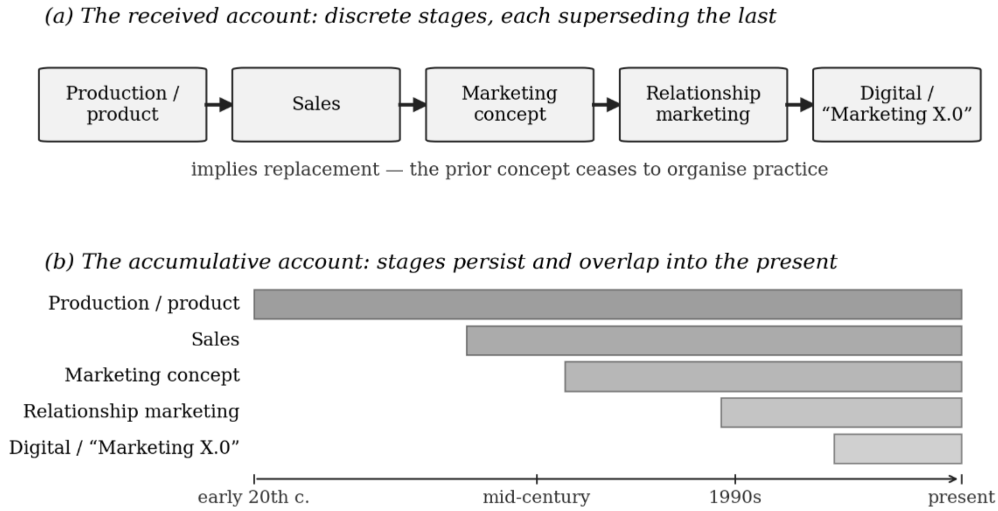

Figure 1. The received succession model and the accumulative model of the development of marketing concepts
Source of the figure: author's development based on [1], [2], [6]

The distinction is not merely descriptive. Under the succession model, the arrival of a new concept licenses the abandonment of the previous one and the research questions attached to it. Under the accumulative model, a new concept must justify itself against the ones already in use, which requires demonstrating that it explains something they do not. The second standard is considerably more demanding, and it is the standard against which the digital transformation of marketing concepts ought to be assessed.

Three changes survive that assessment. The first concerns the status of value co-creation. When Vargo and Lusch advanced the service-dominant logic in 2004, the proposition that value is co-created rather than delivered was principally a conceptual reorientation, because firms possessed neither the interaction infrastructure nor the data to involve customers continuously in the creation of value [5]. Digital infrastructure supplied precisely that. Kannan and Li accordingly define digital marketing not as an additional channel but as an adaptive, technology-enabled process through which firms co-create value with customers, and organise the field around the customer decision journey and its digital touchpoints rather than around the seller's instruments [7]. The concept did not change; its executability did. This is a real and important transformation, but it is a transformation of practice catching up with theory, not of theory being replaced.

The second concerns the scope of what can be observed and adjusted. Rust argues that artificial intelligence, large-scale data, the internet and the expansion of networks are producing a revolution that renders the 1960s-style four Ps increasingly obsolete, with personalisation at scale displacing mass-market logic [8]. This is a forward-looking assessment rather than an empirical finding, and it should be read as such; but the underlying observation is sound in a narrow and important sense. Marketing instruments that were previously set at the level of the segment can now be set at the level of the individual and revised continuously, which changes the unit of decision even where it leaves the objective of the decision untouched.

The third is a distinction that clarifies the entire debate. Verhoef and colleagues separate three phenomena that are routinely conflated: digitisation, the encoding of analogue information; digitalisation, the alteration of existing processes through information technology; and digital transformation proper, a company-wide change that produces a new business model [9]. Only the third is transformational in the strict sense. Applied to the marketing literature, the distinction is uncomfortable, because a substantial proportion of what is described as the digital transformation of marketing is, by this definition, digitalisation - established processes of segmentation, targeting, communication and measurement executed with faster and cheaper instruments. Huang and Rust's framework points the same way: their progression from mechanical through thinking to feeling intelligence is a claim about which marketing tasks become susceptible to automation, which is a claim about capability substitution rather than about the arrival of a new organising concept [10].

Against these genuine changes stands a considerable quantity of relabelling. The most visible instance is the Marketing 1.0 to 5.0 numbering itself. Piazza and Abrahamson's review of three decades of research on management fashion establishes that managerial practices gain and lose popularity through supply-side rhetoric - the activity of consultants, publishers and business media - rather than through demonstrated efficacy [11]. Version numbering borrowed from software is a notably efficient vehicle for rhetoric of that kind: it asserts supersession by notation alone, implies that the preceding version is deprecated, and requires no evidence that the increment corresponds to a distinct construct.

The problem is not confined to popular frameworks. Albert and Thomson examined fourteen relational constructs drawn from 767 articles, 1,753 scales and approximately 9,200 items, and found that constructs bearing different names overlap by an average of 43 per cent - 21 per cent even within top-tier journals - while constructs bearing identical names carry an average of 5.3 distinct meanings [12]. These are the jangle and jingle fallacies operating at scale, and they constitute direct evidence that marketing terminology accumulates faster than it is validated or discriminated. A discipline in that condition is poorly placed to determine whether a newly named digital concept is a discovery or a synonym. Table 1 sets the received account of each conceptual stage against what the cited evidence actually supports.

If digital technology had effected a genuine conceptual transformation, one would expect its adoption to produce reliable improvements in performance. The evidence is more qualified than that. Mu and Zhang, drawing on four years of multi-source data on Chinese public and private companies, found that artificial intelligence marketing usage positively affects profitability, mediated through customer acquisition and customer satisfaction; but the effect is conditional, constrained by employee resistance to change, by technological velocity and by industry competition, so that returns depend on organisational readiness rather than on adoption as such [13]. Ngo's meta-analysis of 132 experiments across 27 studies reaches a comparable conclusion from the opposite direction: augmentation generally improves decision outcomes, but genuine synergy - human-machine collaboration outperforming the better of human-alone and machine-alone - is uncommon and strongly context-dependent, with structured analytical tasks favouring the machine alone and creative or ambiguous tasks favouring collaboration [15].

Table 1.

The received account of conceptual succession compared with the supporting evidence

Conceptual stage	Core premise	Received account of the effect of digital technology	What the cited evidence supports
Production and product orientation	Output volume and product quality determine demand	Rendered obsolete by customer centricity	The concept obscures how developed earlier practice already was; the same critique applies to the later eras [1]
Sales orientation	Demand must be stimulated through persuasion	Replaced by inbound and permission-based logic	Persuasion persists; digital reconfigured the touchpoints through which it operates rather than displacing it [7]
Marketing concept	Customer needs precede and govern production	Finally fulfilled through data-driven personalisation	Fulfilment is conditional on organisational readiness, not on adoption [13], [14]
Relationship marketing	Retention and interaction outrank the discrete transaction	Automated by CRM and marketing technology	Digital restored the direct producer-consumer contact that mass production had interrupted [6]
Service-dominant logic	Value is co-created with the customer, not delivered to them	Superseded by AI-driven value creation	Digital made co-creation operationally executable rather than superseding it [5], [7]
“Marketing 4.0 / 5.0”	Technology itself constitutes a new paradigm	A further conceptual stage in the sequence	No peer-reviewed validation distinguishing it from the prior concepts was located; the labelling follows the pattern management-fashion research describes [11], [12]

Source of the table: author's development based on [1], [5], [6], [7], [11], [12], [13], [14]

Practitioner evidence points the same way. Gartner's 2026 survey of 401 marketing leaders, conducted between January and March 2026 across North America, the United Kingdom and Europe, records that seventy per cent of chief marketing officers consider becoming an artificial intelligence leader a critical goal for the year, while an equal proportion acknowledge that their internal processes are not yet mature enough to implement and scale it, and only thirty per cent report mature or fully developed readiness; allocation to artificial intelligence stands at 15.3 per cent of marketing budgets [14]. A conceptual paradigm that had genuinely displaced its predecessors would not, well into its second decade of prominence, exhibit so wide a gap between aspiration and demonstrated capability. What the data describe is not a completed conceptual transition but an uneven and contingent diffusion of technique.

Digital technologies have transformed marketing, but the transformation is of execution rather than of concept, and the difference matters. The service-dominant proposition that value is co-created was formulated before the infrastructure existed to act on it; digital technology supplied that infrastructure and thereby converted a conceptual claim into an operational practice. The customer decision journey displaced the seller's instrument set as the organising unit of the field. The unit of marketing decision moved from the segment to the individual. These are substantial changes, and none of them requires the postulate of a new marketing concept in order to be described.

What does not survive scrutiny is the periodised narrative in which these changes are conventionally embedded. That narrative was already known to misdescribe the twentieth century, its stages having been shown to obscure the sophistication of earlier practice and its era boundaries to be artefacts of the classifier's chosen criterion. Extending it to the present, with version numbers standing in for evidence of conceptual novelty, reproduces the same error under more modern vocabulary, in a field independently documented to generate labels faster than it validates them.

Two implications follow for research on marketing concepts. The first is methodological: a proposed new concept should be required to demonstrate discriminant validity against the concepts already in use before it is admitted to the sequence, which is a testable requirement and one the Marketing X.0 family has not been asked to meet. The second is substantive: since the performance returns to digital and artificial intelligence marketing are demonstrably conditional on organisational readiness rather than on adoption, the productive research question is not which paradigm has superseded which, but which organisational configurations convert available technique into realised capability. Framed that way, the transformation of marketing concepts under digital technology becomes an empirical problem rather than a matter of periodisation.

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