

Special Issue on Qualitative Approaches to E-marketing and Online Consumer Behaviour: Guest Editors' Introduction

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Guest Editors

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The new possibilities offered by digital technologies facilitate advanced forms of exchange and interaction between consumers and businesses. Thanks to the Internet, consumers are presented with new opportunities to enhance their power in relationships with businesses. Besides having access to an unprecedented amount of information, online consumers can compare a vast range of products, access independent and professional sources of expertise, and interact in an efficient and productive manner with firms and institutions. As a result, online consumers may play an active role in both marketing communication programmes and the design of products and their related sets of benefits and values. These consumers are more willing and prepared to disseminate their opinions about brands and products -whether supportive or unfavourable, and even to sanction firms among far-reaching audiences. Online consumers benefit from a collective intelligence, demand greater control over their shopping experience and the design of *value propositions* in terms of their own individual interests.

In the context of digital technologies, businesses are better prepared to face the challenges of satisfying online consumers. In addition to benefiting from Internet-based processing systems to manage great masses of consumer data, firms may adopt advanced customer-centric paradigms and define and develop e-marketing strategies and programmes that are more precise and more closely matched to customers' needs.

The potential of digital technologies to transform the marketing environment has resulted in a great deal of research on the online consumer and the business strategies and orientations which companies adopt in order to build relationships with consumers through the Internet. Initial research has mostly focused on developing consumer profiles and identifying online segments in this digital marketing environment. However, the expansion of e-commerce in general and the widespread adoption of the Internet as a marketing channel led to the appearance of a broad and varied array of research topics on consumer behaviour and e-marketing. This includes the e-shopping decision, online consumer satisfaction and loyalty, and trust in purchasing decisions on the Internet.

Interest in qualitative approaches to research in e-marketing and online consumer behaviour has increased in recent times, thus facilitating a more in-depth analysis of the motivations and perceptions of connected consumers. Qualitative approaches enable researchers to access online consumer behaviour, often through direct observation, in its natural environment. They facilitate the analyses of how consumers shop and interact with one another by means of digital technologies. Importantly, such research is consumer-centric, focusing on emerging consumer perspectives rather than a researcher-defined agenda. In this way, qualitative research allows gaining deep insights and a better understanding of consumer behaviour which might not otherwise be possible by adopting solely quantitative approaches.

Thus, qualitative methods may be considered as important elements in the Internet researcher's *toolbox*. In fact, with the development of social networking, qualitative and mixed methods approaches may emerge as important contributors to the field: in ways such as helping to discover the new forms through which the Internet empowers consumers; facilitating the exploration of new routes for co-creation of value and for consumer participation in the innovation processes; aiding with the evaluation of the impact of personalization practices developed within eCRM programmes on consumers; and, promoting the analysis of consumer behaviour in virtual consumption communities.

With this editorial project we aim to reflect on and discuss the use of qualitative techniques within e-marketing research. A collection of high-quality theoretical and qualitative-empirical analyses - which have undergone a rigorous triple-blind review process - is presented. They facilitate further exploration of the digital marketing arena through a qualitative lens, and consider the contribution of qualitative approaches to the growing knowledge about the issues surrounding the behaviour of people as online consumers.

Contributions to the Special Issue

In the first article, entitled *Augmented focus groups: on leveraging the peculiarities of online virtual worlds when conducting in-world focus groups*, Chris Houlliez and Edward Gamble provide a remarkable approach to the opportunities that virtual worlds offer for e-qualitative marketing research. As well as identifying the limitations of

importing real-world methods into virtual environments, they also propose and test conceptually-new methods for focus groups that adapt to the specific consumption context of virtual worlds.

In *How to use qualitative research to design a managerially useful e-service questionnaire*, John Rossiter outlines four phases of qualitative research necessary to derive more valid, reliable, and managerially useful measures. He clearly stresses the importance of capturing in-depth information about consumer and industry perspectives in the process of developing appropriate measures, making a very strong case for the need of qualitative research in creating meaningful tools for measuring complex phenomena.

Aswo Safari presents insights regarding the role of trust in international online transactions in his article *Customers' international online trust – insights from focus group interviews*. The study illustrates how focus group research can reveal intricate relationships among theoretical concepts. The article shows that online trust in international transaction contexts has multiple dimensions that are highly interdependent and need to be carefully managed by companies in order to encourage international consumers to order online.

Focus group research is also the qualitative research method tackled by Eva María Murgado-Armenteros, Francisco José Torres-Ruiz and Manuela Vega-Zamora in their article *Differences between online and face-to-face focus groups, viewed through two approaches*. They compare and contrast online focus groups with offline focus groups, taking into account differences in the way European and Anglo-Saxon market research traditions have defined and developed this research method. They find that online focus groups can fulfil the premises of Anglo-Saxon approaches but are less suitable as a method if the goals and foundations of European approaches to focus groups are used.

Bernadett Koles and Peter Nagy's explore virtual consumer identity in their paper entitled *Virtual customers behind avatars: the relationship between virtual identity and virtual consumption in Second Life*. They look at how consumers tend to link the virtual world and the real world through the expression of self. Their fieldwork is undertaken in the virtual world of Second Life and analysed by directed content analysis. A number of important implications for digital marketing emerge from their study, such as the tendency of individuals to socialise in the virtual world with others similar to themselves, the lack of trust in others in the virtual environment and the readiness of individuals to explore more alternative options when compared to the real world.

In their paper entitled *Uncovering the nature of information processing of men and women online: the comparison of two models using the think-aloud method*, Manon Arcand and Jacques Nantel undertake research which aims to assist in the development of websites more suited to either men or women's information processing strategies. They employ the think-aloud-method that involves asking participants to verbalise their thoughts while carrying out a task, thus facilitating access to thoughts that would normally be hidden. The results of the research provide a number of managerial implications in terms of optimising websites to appeal to men or women.

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