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## Digital Marketing Strategies to Meet Digital Consumers' Behavior in the New Era: Challenges, Path, and Interventions to Navigate the Technological and Social Turbulence

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Digital Marketing Strategies to Meet Digital Consumers' Behavior in the New Era: Challenges, Path, and Interventions to Navigate the Technological and Social Turbulence

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## Abstract

This paper examines how digital marketing is being reshaped by five interrelated tensions: balancing data privacy and personalization; navigating global–local dynamics (including cultural sensitivities and country-of-origin effects); integrating artificial intelligence without losing human connection; ensuring authentic communication to mitigate reputational risks linked to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) and ethical storytelling; and responding to shifting consumer preferences, particularly among younger generations. We combine a targeted literature review with semistructured interviews of marketing professionals across industries and seniority levels. Findings portray marketers as “tightrope walkers” who negotiate paradoxes that redefine the function. We propose an integrated framework that synthesizes previously fragmented strands into a coherent structure and reconceptualizes these tensions as structuring logics rather than contextual challenges. We also identify the governance conditions that make them workable in practice—trust-based data ecosystems, context-conditioned glocal capabilities, human-in-the-loop AI, and evidence-bearing ESG communication. Managerially, the framework offers a roadmap to balance agility with coherence, data with empathy, and innovation with trust. Limitations stem from the qualitative, practitioner-focused design; future research should incorporate consumer data, quantitative tests, and cross-industry comparisons to assess boundary conditions and generalizability.

**Keywords:** Digital marketing, Digital consumers' behavior

**JEL classification:** M31

## 1 Introduction

Digital acceleration, platform proliferation, and advances in artificial intelligence are reshaping how firms communicate, create value, and build relationships with consumers (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2020; Verma et al., 2021; Wessel et al., 2025). These forces interact with broader socio-political and cultural shifts—geopolitical tensions, supply-chain disruptions, environmental emergencies—that amplify uncertainty and elevate marketing's strategic role (Zhabin et al., 2016). In everyday practice,

marketers operate under competing pressures that cut across technology, culture, and ethics, making the navigation of paradoxes a central professional task (Kumar et al., 2025).

A substantial body of research has illuminated individual facets of this transformation, including personalization (Han et al., 2023; Teeppapal, 2025), “glocal” branding (de Mooij, 2019), consumer responses in digital settings (Hardcastle et al., 2025; Ozuem et al., 2021; Sahut & Laroche, 2025), and emergent technologies (Buhalis et al., 2023). Yet these contributions

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have largely advanced in parallel, yielding conceptual fragmentation that obscures how such forces jointly shape marketing work. Practitioners, by contrast, experience these pressures simultaneously: they must reconcile the demand for tailored experiences with heightened expectations of privacy and consent (Saura, 2024; Strycharz & Segijn, 2022); maintain global brand coherence while adapting to cultural sensitivities, polarized “culture war,” and country-of-origin effects (de Mooij, 2019; Reyes-Mercado & Panarina, 2024); integrate AI at scale without eroding human connection and strategic oversight (Pagani & Wind, 2025; Van Esch & Black, 2021); communicate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) and ethical commitments authentically to avoid reputational risks such as greenwashing (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Persakis et al., 2025); and respond to shifting preferences—especially among younger cohorts—who prioritize immediacy, cocreation, and purpose (Cagala & Babčanová, 2024; Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Priporas et al., 2017). While prior work engages each area, it seldom examines how professionals navigate these tensions jointly, nor how such navigation informs marketing theory.

Current conceptual frameworks lag behind the lived experience of professionals who continuously negotiate these constitutive tensions. The literature offers few practice-informed syntheses that connect first-order challenges to higher-order themes and aggregate dimensions in ways that both explain present dynamics and guide capability building (Rego et al., 2022; Ryan, 2016). Addressing this gap requires placing practitioner insight in dialogue with fragmented streams to develop a coherent, theoretically meaningful account.

To align inquiry with the tensions articulated above, we ask: How do marketing professionals interpret and navigate the constitutive tensions that structure contemporary digital marketing practice? We operationalize this overarching question across the following domains: balancing data privacy and personalization; managing global consistency and local relevance in culturally polarized environments and in light of country-of-origin effects; integrating AI while preserving human connection and strategic oversight; ensuring authenticity in ESG and ethical storytelling to mitigate reputational risk; and responding to shifting consumer preferences, particularly among younger generations.

The study shows that the five tensions function as structuring logics—not episodic challenges—governing contemporary marketing practice and identifies the governance conditions through which practitioners make them workable in situ. This finding advances theory in three ways: it integrates

previously fragmented literatures into a coherent structure; it reconceptualizes the above tensions as structuring logics rather than contextual challenges, thereby extending views of marketing as a boundary-spanning function exposed to competing institutional pressures (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2020); and it generates avenues for future research on trust-based data ecosystems, geopolitical and cultural conditioning of global strategies, and governance of AI that safeguards relational quality (Jaakkola, 2020; Rego et al., 2022). In practical terms, the framework offers a roadmap for developing future-ready capabilities that balance agility with coherence, data with empathy, and innovation with trust. The remainder of the paper reviews the literature and qualitative design, presents the findings and framework, and discusses theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and future research directions.

## 2 Digital marketing and consumers' behavior: overview and emerging tensions

Scholarly interest in digital and social media marketing—and in consumer behavior—has a long lineage (Stephen, 2016). Digital marketing concerns the use of technology to support marketing activities and better meet customer needs (Bala & Verma, 2018). Over the past two decades it has moved from augmenting traditional techniques to reshaping how firms communicate, engage, and create value (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Consumer behavior classically examines how individuals search for, evaluate, purchase, and experience products and services (Gajjar, 2013; Peter & Olson, 2010). The postpandemic acceleration of digital adoption has reconfigured both domains, exposing new vulnerabilities and expectations in consumer–brand relations (Agus et al., 2021; Verma et al., 2021) and foregrounding what recent work terms digital consumer behavior—behavior unfolding on digital platforms (Efendioğlu, 2024; Jílková & Králová, 2021).

These are mutually shaping developments: advances in digital marketing alter how consumers interact with platforms (Rachmad, 2024), while evolving expectations compel marketers to adapt continuously to remain relevant (Bala & Verma, 2018; Kingsnorth, 2022). Expectations among younger cohorts—salience of transparency, personalization, and purpose—have become particularly consequential (Cagala & Babčanová, 2024; Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Priporas et al., 2017). As a result, digital marketing is no longer a static toolkit but a dynamic ecosystem in which technological, cultural, and ethical forces coevolve (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2020; Ryan, 2016).

Building on prior work across personalization/privacy, global–local branding, AI-enabled marketing, authenticity/ESG communication, and generational change, a convergent pattern emerges: Contemporary marketing is shaped by a small set of recurrent contradictions that cut across these streams. Rather than treating them as separate topics, the literature points to interdependent pressures that coevolve in practice. In our synthesis, these pressures resolve into five tensions that repeatedly surface across studies and contexts—data privacy and personalization; global coherence and local resonance; AI-driven scale and human connection; shifting consumer preferences; and authenticity versus reputational risk. We treat these not as a taxonomy, but as interlocking forces that together organize how marketing work is currently performed and theorized.

*Balancing data privacy and personalization.* Personalization enhances relevance yet intensifies concerns about data collection and use, producing the well-known privacy paradox (Saura, 2024; Strycharz & Segijn, 2022). Recent work shows that the viability of personalization depends on trust-based data ecosystems—transparency, consent, and ethical governance—rather than on campaign-level tweaks (Han et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2024). This reframes the issue from a tactical trade-off to a system-level governance requirement.

*Global–local (glocalization).* Classic branding scholarship emphasizes balancing global coherence and local resonance (de Mooij, 2019; Svensson, 2001). Today this balance is negotiated amid cultural polarization and renewed country-of-origin salience, with boycotts and geopolitical tensions acting as asymmetric contingencies that can invert the returns to standardization (Hashmi et al., 2025; Reyes-Mercado & Panarina, 2024). Glocalization thus operates as a context-conditioned capability, requiring situated cultural intelligence and adaptive playbooks.

*Integrating AI without losing human connection.* Research documents AI's gains in efficiency and scale across analytics, targeting, and content (Buhalis et al., 2023), but also warns of relational erosion absent strategic oversight (Van Esch & Black, 2021). This implies treating relational quality—perceived empathy, trust, recovery capability—as a coequal performance dimension and embedding human-in-the-loop and task boundaries within dynamic marketing capabilities.

*Shifting consumer preferences.* Preferences among younger cohorts tighten the other four tensions by raising thresholds for privacy, speed, participation,

and ethics (Cagala & Babčanová, 2024; Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Priporas et al., 2017). In algorithmically curated environments, classic behavioral categories—habitual, impulsive, complex, variety-seeking (Kaas, 1982; Kahn, 1995)—play out on compressed, multi-touchpoint journeys, which calls for multilayered segmentations that combine digital literacy and value orientations.

*Authenticity vs reputational risk (ESG/ethical storytelling).* Under hyper-transparency, symbolic claims lacking verifiable action expose brands to greenwashing/purpose-washing and reputational hazards (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Pagano et al., 2018). This shifts attention from message creativity to evidence-bearing communication: narratives anchored in traceable metrics, third-party attestations, and proof of impact, rendering authenticity a credibility constraint.

Despite robust contributions on each stream (privacy/personalization; global branding; AI-enabled marketing; authenticity/ESG; generational preferences), the state of knowledge remains fragmented. Many studies treat tensions in isolation, privilege technology or consumer responses, and say less about how practitioners jointly navigate these contradictions in everyday decisions (Buhalis et al., 2023; de Mooij, 2019; Han et al., 2023; Ozuem et al., 2021). What is missing is an integrative, practice-informed synthesis that (a) connects first-order challenges reported by professionals to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions; (b) specifies governance conditions (e.g., trust-based data practices; human-in-the-loop AI) under which strategies remain viable; and (c) theorizes these tensions as structuring logics rather than contingent anomalies, thereby advancing theory beyond description and dialoguing with views of marketing as a boundary-spanning function exposed to competing institutional logics (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2020; Jaakkola, 2020; Rego et al., 2022).

As a result, the gap we address is twofold: (a) the absence of a coherent framework integrating the five tensions into a single explanatory structure; and (b) the scarcity of empirically grounded insight into how marketing professionals interpret and manage these converging pressures jointly in real contexts. To address this gap, we conducted a qualitative study (in particular in-depth interviews with experienced marketing professionals). Our aim was to identify the key tensions that contemporary marketing professionals face and the strategies they use to navigate them, and to leverage these insights to develop a practice-informed integrated framework that advances understanding of the evolving dynamics of digital marketing and digital consumer behavior.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

N°	Age	Gender	Managerial seniority	Industry	Company size
1	37	Female	Middle level manager	Information technology	Large
2	55	Male	Senior manager	Food sector	Large
3	51	Female	Senior manager	Food sector	Medium
4	28	Female	Junior manager	Food sector	Large
5	37	Female	Middle level manager	Banking	Medium
6	35	Male	Junior manager	Services	Medium
7	46	Male	Senior manager	Food sector	Medium
8	38	Male	Middle level manager	Services	Medium
9	27	Male	Junior manager	Information technology	Large
10	38	Male	Middle level manager	Services	Large
11	33	Male	Middle level manager	Services	Medium
12	53	Female	Senior manager	Food sector	Small
13	51	Male	Senior manager	Information technology	Small
14	40	Male	Middle level manager	Food sector	Large
15	57	Male	Senior manager	Information technology	Small
16	42	Female	Senior manager	Banking	Small
17	29	Female	Junior manager	Banking	Large

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Sample and data gathering

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach aimed at understanding the evolving challenges in digital marketing and the strategies marketing managers need to implement in order to address them. To integrate practical insights with the conceptual findings, the study employed semi-structured interviews based on the literature analyzed in the previous chapter, which helped to define the interview questions. Combining literature review with qualitative interviews has proven effective in previous research, and this dual approach enables scholars to build stronger connections with participants and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Palmucci et al., 2025). In other words, the integration of conceptual and empirical knowledge not only enriches theoretical analysis but also increases the practical utility of the research outcomes. Consequently, the interview protocol consisted of three different sections: (a) exploration of recent changes in digital marketing and digital consumers' behavior observed by the respondent; (b) discussion of real-life challenges and strategic dilemmas faced in practice; (c) reflections on actionable recommendations and competencies needed for future-ready marketing professionals.

With regard to the sample, we decided to conduct interviews with domain experts (Bogner et al., 2009). This format was chosen for its flexibility and ability to elicit in-depth responses while maintaining comparability across participants (Flick, 2018; Kvale &

Brinkmann, 2009). Also, the expert interview method was specifically chosen because it recognizes experts not merely as informants, but as holders of “systemic and process knowledge” relevant to a defined field (Bogner et al., 2009). This type of interview is particularly effective in exploratory research when the aim is to gain early insights into complex, underresearched, or dynamic phenomena (Bogner & Menz, 2009). Consequently, interviewees were considered as both knowledge agents and organizational interpreters, offering contextualized interpretations of trends and tensions that cannot be fully captured through document analysis alone. Their perspectives acted as what Bogner et al. (2009) call “crystallization points” of tacit and experience-based expertise—especially valuable in fast-evolving fields such as digital marketing.

Thus, seventeen marketing professionals were recruited using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), based on their direct involvement in digital marketing roles across a spectrum of industries. The sample (for more details see Table 1) was constructed to maximize diversity along the dimensions of age (with an average age of 41 years), gender (10 males and 7 females), managerial seniority (7 senior managers, 6 middle level managers, and 4 junior managers), industry (including banking, food sector, tech, and services), and company size (7 large, 6 medium, and 4 small enterprises<sup>1</sup>), a strategy consistent with recommendations on achieving data richness and analytic transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviewees were contacted individually and informed about the study's exploratory aim focused on new understandings in digital marketing. Each interview

<sup>1</sup> We followed the EU SME definition. The category of micro, small-, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is made up of enterprises which employ fewer than 250 persons and which have an annual turnover not exceeding €50 million and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding €43 million.



Interview insights (first order)	Themes (second order)	Integrated framework dimensions
“Users want personalization but fear cookies.”	Privacy–personalization paradox; trust & consent	Balancing data privacy and personalization
“Global messages don’t work locally.”	Global vs. local brand tensions; contextual intelligence; COO	Global–local (glocalization)
“AI speeds us up but feels less human.”	Automation vs. human connection; relationship quality	Integrating AI without losing human connection
“Gen Z wants proof, not promises.”	Ethical consumption; transparency; proof of impact	Shifting consumer preferences
“Purpose/ESG claims must be backed by evidence.”	Authenticity; greenwashing risk; reputation management	Authenticity vs. reputational risk (ESG/ethical storytelling)

Fig. 1. From interview insights to the integrated framework.

lasted between 25 and 30 minutes and was conducted online or via phone.

### 3.2 Data analysis

To systematize the conceptual contribution of the study, a theory synthesis approach was adopted (Jaakkola, 2020). This method, particularly suitable for conceptual research, involves the integrative combination of concepts, models, and frameworks drawn from multiple theoretical traditions to develop new explanatory or prescriptive insights. Rather than testing hypotheses, theory synthesis aims to build an interpretive structure capable of capturing the complexity and multilevel dynamics of the phenomenon under study. The synthesis was guided by a structured process of abstraction and recombination, as outlined by Jaakkola, and involved iterative cycles of matching theoretical constructs from the literature with insights derived from the expert interviews. Therefore, practically, data were analyzed following procedures consistent with prior qualitative research, with a focus on the most recurrent responses, summarizing key content and organizing it into visual formats such as charts (e.g., Palmucci, 2024). This approach facilitated comparison across responses, allowing us to identify both similarities and differences, which were crucial in developing the framework proposed. This method aligns with established qualitative practices involving transcription, preliminary coding, theme identification, and validation of findings (Kokshagina & Schneider, 2023). In other words, this process allowed for the generation of an integrated framework connecting microlevel managerial actions with macrolevel strategic tensions such as the personalization–privacy tradeoff and the global–local branding dilemma. Throughout the entire research process, methodological rigor was ensured by

adhering to best practices in qualitative inquiry. In line with the recommendations of previous studies (Santoro et al., 2019; Saunders & Townsend, 2016), the study clearly justifies its sampling logic, interview design, and analytic integration. Transparency in reporting, theoretical alignment, and triangulation between literature and empirical insights contribute to the study’s overall credibility. While the findings are not statistically generalizable, they offer conceptually rich and contextually grounded insights of high relevance to both scholars and practitioners operating at the intersection of digital marketing and digital consumers’ behavior.

To clarify the conceptual design and strengthen transparency, Fig. 1 illustrates the logical chain followed in this study. The figure shows how first-order insights derived from the interviews were coded into broader themes, and how these themes were subsequently integrated with literature insights to develop the final framework. This visualization provides a step-by-step representation of the process through which the conceptual contribution was built, linking empirical evidence and theoretical synthesis.

## 4 Findings and discussion: recent evolutions and challenges relating to digital marketing and consumer behavior

### 4.1 Personalization versus privacy: navigating the trust dilemma

In today’s context, digital marketing is at the center of a deep and ongoing revolution. Marketing professionals no longer deal solely with challenges related to positioning or branding but are immersed in a digital transformation that is radically reshaping how communication, value creation, and relationships with consumers take place. The so-called post-Covid

era has exponentially accelerated the adoption of advanced technologies—from artificial intelligence to immersive digital platforms—, making it essential for digital marketers to master constantly evolving tools and strategies (Agus et al., 2021).

In particular, in alignment with the literature review presented at the beginning of this work, the qualitative analysis also revealed that the main challenges of contemporary digital marketing include the delicate balance between personalization and privacy (Han et al., 2023). “Personalization works only when the value exchange is explicit. After we moved to consented, zero-party data, opt-in rates rose, and complaints dropped,” said an interviewed middle level manager working for a large information technology company.

Digital users expect tailored experiences—dynamic content, customized offers, personalized interactions—but at the same time demand transparency and control over their data. In accordance with this, the same middle manager revealed:

The typical user doesn’t want to spend time browsing content they have no interest in, yet at the same time, they’re instinctively uncomfortable with sharing information about the content they actually care about. In other words, there’s an instinctive lack of trust toward anyone asking them to accept cookies. And in a way, they’re right—given how invasive some marketing practices have become, especially the more aggressive approaches of certain companies. On the other hand, this makes it incredibly difficult for us to deliver relevant, meaningful content.

From these words, it is clear that digital marketers must build ecosystems that deliver relevant experiences without sacrificing trust, navigating regulations and ethical data collection practices (cookies, tracking, informed consent).

#### 4.2 Global messaging versus local relevance: the glocalization challenge

Our study also confirms that marketing managers increasingly struggle to maintain the right balance between messages that can be communicated globally and those that must be tailored for local markets—what we have previously referred to as the “glocalization challenge.” On this topic one interviewed middle level manager employed at a large international services company explained: “Some advertising messages are relevant on a global scale but have little to no impact on consumers at the local level. At times it feels like we are advertising two completely different products.”

The same interviewee also added:

In certain cases the risk is not limited to being ineffective, but also getting it wrong and making huge mistakes. Imagine having to deliver inclusive messages (e.g. diversity & inclusion)—which are becoming increasingly important for younger audiences—in some markets, while in others you need to approach the same topics with much more caution due to current restrictive policies on these topics. You constantly run the risk of getting it wrong, and our job becomes a constant process of adjustment.

Striking the right balance between globalization and localization of messaging thus emerges in our research as one of the most pressing challenges faced by marketing managers today, particularly in large and international contexts, as an interviewed senior manager working for a small bank explained: “We keep a global narrative, but claims, tone, and visuals change by country. The ‘one-size-fits-all’ version underperforms and sometimes backfires.”

#### 4.3 AI integration without losing the human touch

Another strategic front that emerges from our study is the need to efficiently integrate AI without losing human connection. With regard to the integration of AI into digital flows (from automated content generation to customer journey optimization and predictive behavior analysis), it is important to be aware of the fact that the risk of dehumanization is real. A senior manager working for a small bank said:

On one hand, compared to when I was a junior, technology is a great enabler, but on the other hand it can now also more easily damage the trust-based relationship with clients. If customers perceive a complete replacement of the human element—for example, campaigns created entirely by artificial intelligence or communication fully mediated by chatbots—they lose trust in the brand, and winning it back becomes extremely difficult.

For this reason, marketing managers must be aware that artificial intelligence cannot replace creative thinking or emotional connection with users; instead, it must become a strategic lever that enhances the human ability to create authentic connections in digital environments. Regarding what digital strategies to implement instead, choosing and managing digital channels is another critical challenge.

One junior manager interviewed, working for a large company in the food sector, in fact claimed:

It is not just about “being present” on the right platforms, but about knowing how to adapt each piece of content to the specific language and context of each touchpoint. The evolution is less about

the novelty of channels and more about their multiplication and the rapid obsolescence of technical skills. TikTok, Instagram Reels, podcasts, the metaverse—each digital environment imposes new rules, requiring agility and constant updates. Today's digital marketer is therefore called upon to combine analytical skills with human sensitivity to build data-driven digital strategies that deliver real impact.

This is to say that, just as digital marketing techniques are rapidly evolving, consumers' behaviors are quickly evolving too. This is in alignment with other evidence confirming how nowadays consumers are increasingly informed, attentive, and sensitive to issues such as sustainability, ethics, and transparency (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), no longer passive recipients of advertising messages but, on the contrary, active, critical, and well-informed individuals, empowered by a growing volume of data and content that makes them more demanding and aware. For this reason, brands (and consequently academic research in this area) are focusing more and more on these evolving purchasing behaviors and preferences of new generations of consumers. It is becoming increasingly important to pay attention not only to the functional value of a product or service, but also to corporate ethics, operational transparency, and commitment to environmental and social sustainability (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). This shift is largely driven by constant exposure to social platforms and online resources where information is shared; this is why integrating AI without losing human connection represents an important challenge.

#### *4.4 New generations, new preferences: the role of demographics in shaping marketing strategy*

The last challenge that emerged from our study refers to the difficult (but at the same time crucial and vital) need to respond to shifting consumer preferences, and this particularly refers to the trends among younger generations. These include practices such as recycling, sustainable food choices, and reducing clothing consumption, but also, as reported by one senior manager interviewed, working for a small information technology enterprise, “to their growing preference for online shopping as never seen in any other generation before.”

This trend (confirmed by recent studies—Sudirjo et al., 2023) cannot be ignored by brands, and scholars' attention is increasingly focusing on these new consumers' buying preferences and expectations toward companies. For example, according to Djafarova and Foots (2022), younger consumers are aware of ethical issues in society and are doing all that they

can—within the limits of their life stage and purchasing power, of course—to have a positive impact. This means that it is no longer the time for passive and anonymous marketing campaigns, as new generations place high value on personalized shopping experiences, without sacrificing control over their personal data as already mentioned before and highlighted in additional studies. Other important generational differences concern preferences for certain forms of communication (Cagala & Babčanová, 2024). According to recent studies, baby boomers prefer traditional communication (promotions, phone calls, direct contact) and prioritize price and personal trust. Generation X combines traditional and modern tools, maintaining the importance of human contact while being open to online platforms, having grown up during the transition from analog to digital. This trend becomes even more pronounced with Millennials (Generation Y), who grew up with the internet and rely less on traditional media, placing more trust in online reviews and social media. It is even more urgent for Generation Z—the most digitally native generation—who seek instant information and rely heavily on peer reviews and online feedback. This was also confirmed in one of the interviews we performed, when a junior marketing manager working for a medium-sized services company stated: “You can sell whatever you want today; however, the only important thing you need to do in order to do so is to build a review system that is efficient both quantitatively and qualitatively.”

#### *4.5 Transparency and authenticity: the ethics of digital communication*

Equally urgent is the issue of authentic communication, especially in the context of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.) and ESG strategies (Pagano et al., 2018). In fact, in the digital ecosystem, the risk of deceptive marketing practices—such as greenwashing, where a company falsely presents its products, services, or practices as more environmentally friendly than they are—is amplified by the speed and virality of information (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). In other words, digital users are no longer satisfied with declarations of intent: they demand tangible evidence, credible storytelling, and verifiable data. On this topic, an interviewee, a senior manager working for a large company in the food sector, stated:

Today it's no longer enough for a company to claim sustainability—digital users want to see the data, understand the real impact, often through transparent reporting or authentic stories from the field, and in some cases you only gain



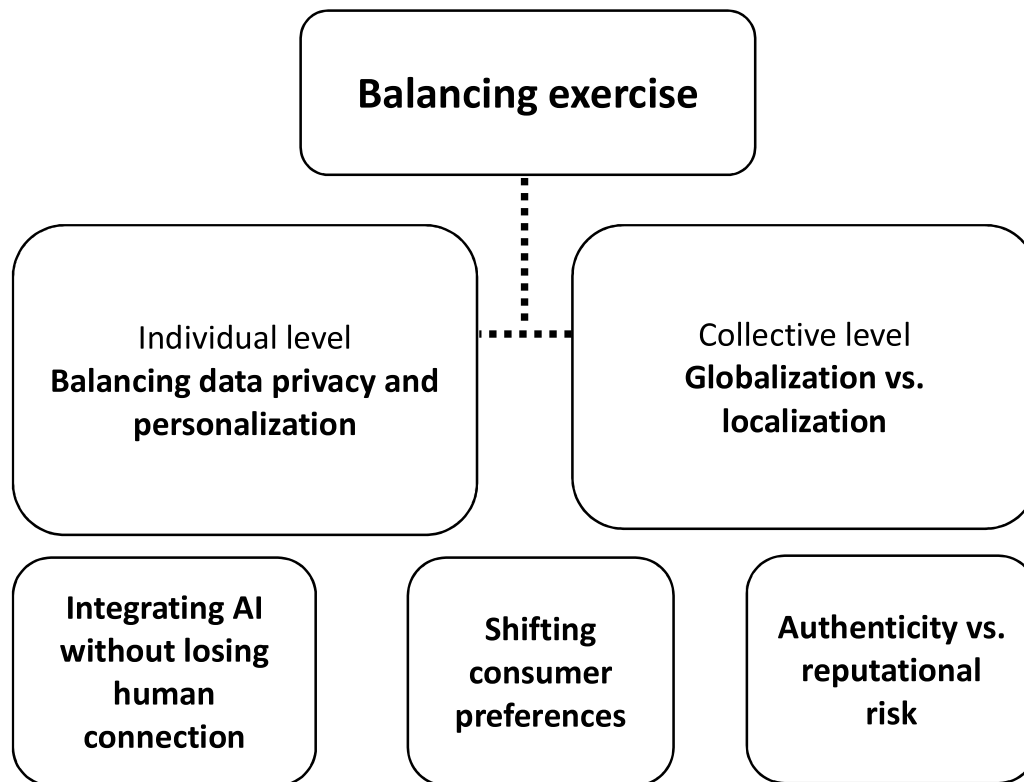


Fig. 2. New marketing challenges.

credibility after documenting your entire production chain with verifiable evidence (consumers also want video...)—that’s when trust is truly established.

Therefore, digital marketing must become a vehicle of transparency, building content that truly reflects the brand’s identity and values, as one of our interviewees, a middle manager working for a large company in the food sector, explained: “We don’t publish ESG slogans unless we can show the metric, the audit, and the footprint story—otherwise we risk credibility overnight.”

#### 4.6 Concluding remarks: reframing marketing practice in a changing world

Across themes, managers describe a continuous balancing act among the tensions. As one interviewee put it:

We design communication campaigns across multiple countries, and this means taking into account, at the same time, the market shift in the U.S., where diversity and inclusion programs are being scaled back, and the European context, where issues like social inclusion, respect for diversity, and inclusive societies are still very much a priority. We

really have to act like tightrope walkers, constantly trying not to fall.

This characterization substantiates the “tightrope” metaphor, capturing the ongoing calibration between nonnegotiables (privacy/brand integrity) and bounded local flexibility.

In conclusion, in a global context marked by constant change, economic instability, cultural polarization, and new demands from consumers, marketing plays an increasingly crucial role. It is essential for professionals in the field to adopt a flexible and dynamic approach, capable of rethinking strategies, tools, and language in order to maintain communication relevance, build meaningful relationships with audiences, and even develop and validate new product concepts aligned with contemporary values (Hoffman et al., 2010). Fig. 2 offers a visual overview of the key challenges that brands are currently navigating (in line with our research question) and that emerged from a combination of literature analysis and expert interviews we conducted in this study.

## 5 Contributions, implications and limitations

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes five main theoretical contributions that advance research on digital marketing in

ways that go beyond descriptive mapping. First, it addresses the fragmentation that has long characterized the literature. Existing studies have often examined phenomena such as personalization (Han et al., 2023), glocal branding (de Mooij, 2019), or digital consumer behavior (Jílková & Králová, 2021) in isolation, while more recent work has predominantly focused either on technological infrastructures (Buhalis et al., 2023) or on consumer responses (Ozuem et al., 2021). This fragmentation has limited the development of integrative perspectives capable of capturing the multidimensional complexity of the digital marketing field. By synthesizing these strands into a coherent conceptual framework, our study contributes to overcoming this gap and provides a more holistic understanding of how different pressures interact in practice. In doing so, we respond to recent calls for frameworks that bridge disconnected areas of research and offer an integrated lens for studying marketing in times of turbulence (Rego et al., 2022).

Second, the paper reconceptualizes emerging tensions not as temporary or contingent challenges but as structuring logics that fundamentally shape the way marketing is practiced and theorized. Specifically, we highlight five tensions—balancing data privacy and personalization; global–local (glocalization); integrating AI without losing human connection; shifting consumer preferences; and authenticity vs. reputational risk (ESG/ethical storytelling)—that marketing professionals must continuously navigate. By positioning these oppositions as constitutive forces rather than contextual difficulties, the framework shows that the very identity of marketing is being redefined through the management of these paradoxes. This perspective aligns with, but also extends, recent theoretical efforts to conceptualize marketing as a boundary-spanning function exposed to competing institutional logics (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2020). Our contribution lies in articulating how such tensions operate as organizing principles, thereby offering a novel theoretical lens for understanding the evolution of marketing practice in an increasingly complex and hybrid environment.

Third, the framework is generative in pointing toward underexplored avenues for future research. For instance, the personalization–privacy paradox invites deeper inquiry into the design of trust-based ecosystems that reconcile consumer empowerment with data-driven strategies (Strycharz & Segijn, 2022). Similarly, the globalization–localization dilemma opens the way for research on how geopolitical and cultural contexts condition glocal branding strategies in times of political polarization and deglobalization pressures (Reyes-Mercado & Panarina, 2024).

Fourth, the paradoxical role of AI suggests an agenda for examining how technology simultane-

ously enhances efficiency and risks dehumanizing consumer relationships (Van Esch & Black, 2021) and how marketing professionals can balance artificial intelligence with emotional intelligence in practice. By articulating these directions, the framework contributes to the conceptual synthesis tradition (Jaakkola, 2020), not only by integrating diverse literatures but also by generating new pathways for theorizing digital marketing in turbulent contexts.

Fifth, we specify how shifting consumer preferences—particularly among younger cohorts—tighten the other tensions by raising thresholds for privacy, authenticity, speed, and participation. Prior work documents Gen-Z expectations for immediacy, cocreation, and ethical alignment (Cagala & Babčanová, 2024; Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Priporas et al., 2017). Our framework extends these insights by linking cohort shifts to organizational design choices (e.g., consent-first data architectures, evidence-bearing ESG communication, and human-in-the-loop AI), thus theorizing preference change as a force that structurally recalibrates the feasible set of marketing strategies rather than a transient demand shock.

Taken together, these contributions advance theoretical debate by providing a more integrative, reflexive, and generative perspective on digital marketing. Rather than portraying marketing challenges as external pressures to be managed, our study conceptualizes them as fundamental structuring forces that shape both professional practice and scholarly theorization. In this sense, the framework contributes to a practice-informed theorization of digital marketing and lays the groundwork for future studies that further connect empirical insights and conceptual synthesis.

## 5.2 Managerial implications and recommendations for marketing managers

In today's fluid, uncertain, and highly competitive environment, the role of the marketing manager has evolved from campaign planner to what one interviewee described as a "tightrope walker." This metaphor encapsulates the growing demand for strategic clarity, mental agility, and the ability to manage competing pressures—technological, cultural, ethical, and emotional—while maintaining coherence across platforms and audiences. The findings of this study point to five major tensions that marketing professionals must confront: balancing data privacy and personalization; global–local (glocalization); integrating AI without losing human connection; shifting consumer preferences; and authenticity vs. reputational risk (ESG/ethical storytelling). These tensions are not isolated—rather, they intersect and reinforce

one another, demanding multidimensional responses and governance choices.

For privacy–personalization, our recommendation is to implement trust-by-design (clear value exchange, consent logs, zero/first-party data programs) so that personalization is contingent on reciprocal control, not merely compliance. For global–local, treat glocalization as a context-conditioned capability: build lightweight playbooks that vary tone, symbolism, and claims by cultural polarization and COO sensitivity, with explicit “red lines” for high-risk contexts. For AI–human connection, adopt human-in-the-loop policies: define tasks for automation vs. human touch, and monitor relational KPIs (e.g., complaint recovery quality, perceived empathy) alongside efficiency. For authenticity–reputation, require evidence-bearing communication (traceable impact metrics, third-party attestations) before ESG claims enter campaigns. For shifting preferences, redesign journeys to support cocreation (reviews, UGC, community pilots) and fast feedback loops that feed both personalization and product learning while ensuring authenticity to mitigate reputation risk.

Thus, this study suggests that new digital consumers want relevance, but on their own terms. This dual demand challenges marketers to implement privacy-by-design strategies, where data-driven personalization is balanced by consent, visibility, and reciprocity; it can be said that privacy and control over personal data have emerged as nonnegotiable expectations. Second, the rise of geopolitical tensions and deglobalization forces brands to rethink the globalization–localization balance. This requires developing glocal communication strategies that preserve brand identity while adapting tone, content, and cultural references to local markets. In line with the evidence reported in [Section 4](#), managers consistently frame this as a deliberate balance across competing demands—a “tightrope” managed through clear nonnegotiables, bounded local flexibility, and rapid feedback loops. Therefore, such strategies must be grounded in an organizational culture that encourages intercultural learning, contextual intelligence, and decentralized responsiveness, and this suggests that there are also important implications for the HR departments within these organizations. In fact, if this intercultural attitude is indeed a critical competency, then recruitment processes must be designed to identify such skills from the outset. Furthermore, training initiatives should actively promote multicultural awareness and, where possible, incorporate mobility programs—especially in larger companies—to expose younger marketing professionals to cultural differences across countries. This would help them develop the cultural sensitivity required to manage

brands with a truly glocal mindset. Third, as artificial intelligence (AI) becomes central to marketing operations, professionals must integrate digital tools in ways that enhance—rather than replace—human creativity. AI can support real-time decision making, customer segmentation, and predictive analytics, but it is the marketer’s ability to embed emotional narrative, empathy, and storytelling that turns automated interactions into lasting relationships. Navigating the expanding ecosystem of channels—from TikTok to the metaverse—requires not only technological fluency but platform-sensitive content design. The core competence that could truly make the difference will be the ability to combine two types of intelligence: artificial intelligence and emotional intelligence—a crucial combination for the new generations of marketing managers, and one that should increasingly be taken into account in brands’ future recruitment and training programs. Finally, the shifting consumer preferences and the growing demand for authenticity make it imperative for brands to adapt to new generations of consumers that, on the one hand, increasingly rely on online shopping and reliable review systems, and on the other hand, request alignment between companies’ communication campaigns and demonstrable ESG practices. In an environment where greenwashing can rapidly erode credibility, marketing must shift from aspirational messaging to verifiable action. Consumers now expect brands to embody their commitments, not merely declare them. Therefore, organizations will increasingly need to seek authenticity not only in their communication campaigns, but also in their recruitment processes—aiming to hire marketing professionals capable of designing such authentic campaigns. In other words, creating authentic communication requires individuals who embody authenticity themselves.

[Table 2](#) summarizes the strategic responses identified in this research (in line with our research question) to tackle the emerging challenges modern marketing managers are encountering, offering a synthesized roadmap for them operating in a context of accelerating complexity.

### 5.3 Limitations

This work, like others, has some limitations. First, its qualitative methodology, while appropriate for capturing depth and context, does not provide statistically generalizable results. The sample consists exclusively of marketing professionals, and as such reflects the supply-side perspective of the marketing process. Although these expert voices offer valuable insight into organizational strategies and dilemmas, the absence of direct consumer perspectives limits the scope of interpretation, particularly concerning

Table 2. Practical implications and strategic approaches to address the emerging challenges of modern marketing.

New challenges	Practical implications and strategic approaches
Balance between personalization and data privacy	Be transparent and build trust
Balance between globalization and localization of messages	Develop so-called glocal messages
Integrating AI without losing human connection	Become technology-savvy while keeping emotional narrative
Shifting consumer preferences	Adapt to new consumers in terms of practices, online shopping and trust in review systems
Authenticity vs. reputational risk	Build documentable campaigns that reflect the brand's identity and values

consumer-level responses to personalization, privacy, and brand ethics. Therefore, future research should adopt mixed-method designs to triangulate findings with consumers' data or perspectives, surveys or behavioral experiments. Such approaches would not only validate the professional perceptions reported here but also reveal potential misalignments between managerial intent and consumers' experience. Additionally, comparative studies across several sectors could illuminate whether certain challenges are industry-specific or universal and help tailor strategic recommendations accordingly.

## 6 Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of how digital marketing strategies and digital consumers' behavior are evolving under the pressure of technological advancement and shifting social and consumers' expectations. In particular it contributes to answering the research question: *What are the new challenges for marketing practitioners in the actual turbulent reality and the strategic approaches to address these challenges of modern marketing?* By integrating literature analysis with expert interviews, it identifies a set of key tensions that define the contemporary marketing landscape and outlines strategic responses grounded in practice. The framework presented offers a visual and conceptual synthesis that can guide both academic inquiry and managerial action. At the center of this transformation stands the modern marketing manager—not just as a planner of campaigns, but as a craftsman of balance, capable of navigating between the poles of data and emotion, automation and authenticity, globalization and localization. This research shows that success lies not in choosing between these forces, but in learning to manage their interplay with intelligence and intentionality. In sum, the findings highlight that modern marketing requires more than technical mastery; it demands a multidimensional approach rooted in cultural awareness, ethical responsibility, and emotional intelligence. Those professionals who develop this hybrid competence—anchored in both strategic clarity and human sensitivity—will be the ones best equipped to turn systemic turbulence into opportunity. In this sense, the role of the marketing

manager becomes not only that of a communicator, but of a translator of complexity into relevance—transforming pressure points into levers for innovation, differentiation, and trust building in a rapidly changing world. Taken together, these findings offer not only a descriptive framework of current digital marketing challenges but also a prescriptive orientation. By clarifying how experienced professionals balance seemingly opposing demands, this study provides a roadmap for marketing managers seeking to navigate complexity through strategic agility, ethical commitment, and culturally attuned execution.

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## Disclosures

AI tools were occasionally used for language refinement.

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