

Teaching and learning disrupted: isomorphic change

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Abstract

Purpose – The marketplace demands a technological skillset among our college graduates, and scholars acknowledge the educational underpinnings (or lack thereof) regarding technology and its place in marketing education. The current research, therefore, aims to explore how academic institutions and programs have responded to coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphic pressures in reshaping the experiences of current marketing students.

Design/methodology/approach – To understand this pressure and its implications with regards to the marketing curriculum, this research explores the integration of technology into the marketing classroom via the three forces of institutional isomorphic change: coercive forces, mimetic processes and normative pressures. The current research uses both primary and secondary data to examine how isomorphism is occurring in digital marketing education.

Findings – We find that the integration of technology into the classroom comes from the forces of institutional isomorphic change. Although these forces are pressuring business schools to include technology in their marketing curriculum, a widespread adoption of this necessary media is yet to follow.

Research limitations/implications – From a research perspective, this paper portrays the forces that are acting to disrupt teaching and learning in the current global marketplace. Previous research tends to focus on how educators can teach a particular subject area. This paper brings together forces of change as related to educators, students and managers.

Practical implications – Educators and their educational institutions have to continue to learn to teach digital marketing. Students have a role to play in that they have to be agents of change for a stronger and newer marketing curriculum. Finally, managers need to partner with educators and students to create a stronger environment for learning practical tools.

Originality/value – Weber (2013) utilized this theoretical foundation for understanding how such pressures impacted the coverage and offering of courses addressing ethical, social and sustainability issues in graduate marketing curricula. This research within the digital marketing educational arena is the first to attempt to understand technology integration into marketing education.

Keywords Social media marketing, Marketing education, Critical theory

Paper type General review

Technology has changed our lives radically over the past few years. As purveyors of information, we have experienced drastic adjustments in our business models – everything from music delivery to news channels to publication outlets has been modified to allow for a communications revolution. As consumers of information, we have seen a major shift in the way we obtain knowledge and engage in both social and



professional interactions. According to [Dahlström and Edelman \(2013\)](#), the new world of on-demand marketing has created consumer demands in four major areas:

- (1) *Now*: Consumers will want to interact anywhere at any time.
- (2) *Can I*: Consumers will want to do truly new things as disparate kinds of information are deployed more effectively in ways that create value for them.
- (3) *For me*: Consumers will expect all data stored about them to be targeted more precisely to their needs or used to personalize what they experience.
- (4) *Simply*: Consumers will expect all interactions to be easy.

[Frederiksen \(2015\)](#), however, contends that our students of marketing are not equipped to respond to these consumer demands because they are “chronically under-taught” online marketing skills necessary for them to survive in the current marketplace because of the fact that “university marketing departments are behind the curve”. Supporting this contention, [Selingo \(2015, p. 12\)](#) reports that “[...] when it comes to teaching and learning using technology, campus officials worry whether students are getting the best experience”. Although technology is often seen as the key driver of innovation in higher education ([Selingo, 2015](#)), it is unclear if students and faculty members are developing a skillset to use the tools necessary to generate knowledge efficiently ([Buzzard et al., 2011](#)).

It is evident that the marketplace demands a technological skillset, and scholars acknowledge the educational underpinnings (or lack thereof) regarding technology and its place in marketing education ([Crittenden and Crittenden, 2015a](#); [McLaughlin, 2014](#)). The current research, therefore, explores how academic institutions and programs have responded to coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphic pressures in reshaping the experiences of current marketing students. [Weber \(2013\)](#) utilized this theoretical foundation for understanding how such pressures impacted the coverage and offering of courses addressing ethical, social and sustainability issues in graduate marketing curricula. Following this line of thinking, the current research uses both primary and secondary data to examine how isomorphism is occurring in digital marketing education. We then suggest that marketing faculty need to positively respond to these isomorphic pressures to provide the current digital natives with the stimulus necessary to cognitively absorb the needed skills.

Integrating technology into the marketing classroom

Building on published sources, [Buzzard et al. \(2011\)](#) explored the notion that current students are studying less and, thus, learning less because of the time spent on technological devices. The authors’ contention was if this was the case, then educators were failing to harness the power of the twenty-first century electronic infrastructure to create an environment for teaching and learning. Current students expect to integrate smart phones, tablets and laptops in their learning environment. To deliver a stimulus to learn, enticing for the current generation, we need to offer a meaningful, relevant and knowledge-driven education, which will satisfy the needs of students and employers. Using digital platforms can lead to better motivated students, creating greater intellectual curiosity and improved learning. Faculty should recognize the intrinsic motivations of the student element in teaching and learning ([Crittenden, 2005](#)).

A more recent exploration of this concern about millennials and their attachment to technology was undertaken by the Media Insight Project ([American Press Institute, 2015](#)). This study found that millennials weave the consumption of news mindfully into their day-to-day lives, and keeping up with what is going on in the world is of critical importance to them. Thus, although this generation of adults may consume differently than generations prior, they are not passive knowledge gatherers; they acquire and share information in a way that harnesses the power of technology. According to [Selingo \(2015, p. 4\)](#), “technology is reshaping the college-going experience for a new generation of students”, and [Mostafa \(2015\)](#) suggests that scholars need to explore the theoretical underpinning of technology implementation in our learning environment.

[Selingo \(2015\)](#) suggests that twenty-first century higher education faces a litany of challenges:

- rising costs;
- low completion rates;
- delivery systems;
- curricula; and
- teaching methods showing their age.

Focusing on the outdated delivery systems, curricula and teaching methods, [Prensky \(2001\)](#) went so far as to suggest that the single biggest problem facing education in the twenty-first century was educators who spoke an outdated language and struggled to teach current students who have grown up in a world of technology. As a result, it would appear that marketing educators are attempting to make rational educational adaptations in a world for which they, as educators, are dealing with considerable uncertainty. Further, with architectural and radical innovation continuing, marketing faculty face the prospect of falling significantly behind practitioners and students. Thus, we contend that a theoretical foundation for understanding the integration of technology into the marketing curriculum is isomorphism.

Isomorphism is that which forces one unit in a population to resemble other units facing the same set of environmental conditions ([Hawley, 1968](#)). Marketing educators have to institutionalize technology in the marketing classroom so as to maintain their legitimacy in the marketing education arena, that is, marketing educators have to “incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society” ([Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 340](#)). If marketing educators integrate technology into the classroom as a learning tool, the integration will likely be homogenous over time as educators are responding to both competitive and institutional forces ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#)). Yet, in the interim, discontinuities will continue to exist between institutions.

Institutional isomorphic change

In the current educational world, there are rankings for basically every component within an academic environment (e.g. value for the educational dollars, best dorm, best food and best athletes). This pressure to perform on a variety of variables has resulted in academic institutions which are constantly on the lookout for what competitors are doing. With regards to technology integration, we contend that such isomorphic pressure is resulting in marketing curricula looking the same so as to provide legitimacy

to what is being taught. To understand this pressure and its implications with regards to the marketing curriculum, this research explores the integration of technology into the marketing classroom via the three forces of institutional isomorphic change: coercive forces, mimetic processes and normative pressures (Figure 1).

Coercive forces

According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), this force of institutional change is largely the result of the pressure exerted on an organization by other organizations upon which the organization is dependent and on expectations from the society. Thus, coercive forces lead to an educational program conforming to standards set by outside organizations (Weber, 2013). In his review of the graduate marketing curricula, Weber (2013) identified coercive forces such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), academic journals, the popular press, business practice and other external societies as exhibiting a coercive force on the ethical, social and sustainability issues addressed in the marketing curriculum. Thus, it would appear that coercive forces are derived from sources internal to the educational process and sources external to the process.

A critical coercive force is the AACSB International as it is one of the major accrediting organizations for business schools. In 2013, this accrediting organization offered Standard 9, which stressed the importance of information technology and the ability of students to use current technologies in business and management contexts (AACSB, 2013). Although not focused specifically or solely on marketing education, Standard 9 was a major impetus for educators to ensure the inclusion of technology in appropriate areas of the curriculum.

Within the marketing academy, the largest association is the American Marketing Association (AMA). Within the AMA is the teaching and learning special interest group (SIG). This AMA SIG played a major role in bringing technology to the forefront of marketing academics when multiple innovation teaching awards were given based on technological innovations in the marketing classroom (Crittenden and Crittenden, 2015a). Recognition from the marketing educators’ premier academy would only serve to invigorate the process for teaching and learning about technology in the marketing classroom and be a driving force for continual change.

Not surprisingly, marketing education journals have also been very active in bringing technology issues to the marketing classroom. For example, Williams *et al.* (2012) suggested that consumer-generated content has emerged as a phenomenon of interest among educational scholars, and Neier and Zayer (2015) noted that the *Journal*

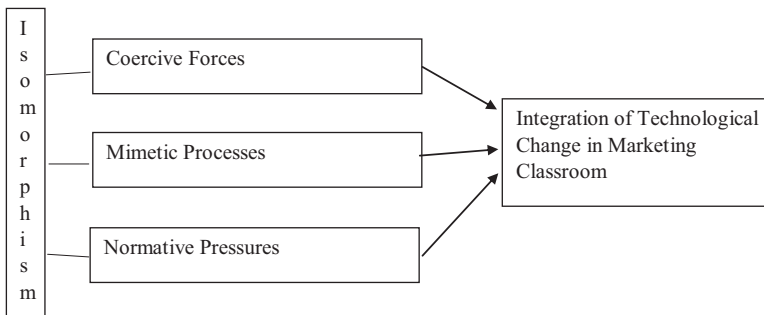


Figure 1. Isomorphism and technological integration

of *Marketing Education* (JME) has had widespread publication of topics with regards to the use of technology in the classroom. Bal *et al.* (2015) provide an overview of the past research on the use of technology and social media in the marketing classroom.

Also, the JME has had several special issues on the topic. Granitz and Pitt (2011) edited an issue focusing on teaching marketing with innovative technology. Within this issue were articles on student and faculty preferences for technology tools in a learning environment; course management systems; the impact of instructional technology on faculty and student satisfaction; and the use of various platforms in the classroom (e.g. Twitter, YouTube and Second Life). Crittenden and Crittenden (2015a, 2015b) edited two special issues focusing on digital and social media marketing in business education. The articles in the first issue provided considerable information about content and expectations in digital and social media courses and programs. The second issue in this two-part special issue series focused specifically on student engagement with digital and social media in marketing education. Platforms explored in the issue articles were Twitter, Facebook and blogs. According to the editors:

The external force of technology in marketing is useful when it can be used to improve practice, and the improvement of practice behooves marketing educators to ensure students of marketing know how to use the technology effectively (Crittenden and Crittenden, 2015b, p. 132).

The above quote shows clearly that coercive forces external to the educational arena are a driving change in our marketing curricula, with Duffy and Ney (2015) arguing the learning environment must be accompanied by an outward industry focus. As such, there are external forces coalescing to a prompt change in the curriculum. Crittenden and Crittenden (2015a) noted the new world of on-demand marketing is an external force for adopting technology in the curriculum. However, it is not just change related to practice; it is also change forced upon marketing students and the graduates of our programs by a larger society of practitioners.

Employers are looking for people who can get things done in this early twenty-first century world of digital and social media. However, in a study conducted by Northeastern University, many hiring managers found recent college graduates lacking, and Table I identifies typical skills employers believed were lacking in recent graduates (Hechinger Report, 2014). Many of these skills are not unique to social media, and yet some have suggested that the use of digital/social media tools and projects in the classroom environment can develop needed skills and learning (Atwong, 2015; Parise *et al.*, 2015).

Skills lacking in college graduates	(%)
Current on technologies	37
Judgment and decision-making	30
Locating, organizing and evaluating information	29
Working with numbers/statistics	28
Written communication	27
Critical and analytical thinking	26
Being innovative/creative	25
Analyzing/solving complex problems	24
Applying knowledge/skills to real world	23

Table I.
Employer
perceptions of
student preparedness

Source: Hechinger Report (2014)

Further, LinkedIn has emerged as an instigator of change with its LinkedIn publishing platform encouraging knowledge sharing in a non-traditional publishing format (Roslansky, 2014). Also, there has been a growth of industry certification programs and platforms such as Hootsuite, HubSpot and Google certification. Such programs and platforms actually broaden the landscape from which coercive changes are derived. According to Brocato *et al.* (2015), it is only natural for the marketing curriculum to adapt to such changes in the marketplace.

Mimetic processes

Organizations often tend to model behaviors and actions of other organizations in the competitive set. This mimicry occurs in academia, for example, when a marketing department copies the curriculum of another marketing department. Mimetic processes result in a college/university conforming to standards set by peer colleges/universities with the end goal of remaining competitive, particularly in recruiting potential students and new members (Weber, 2013).

It is this mimicry Munoz and Wood (2015) refer to when they describe the dedicated digital marketing undergraduate- and graduate-level programs at business schools such as Baruch College, University of Michigan–Dearborn, DePaul University and Sacred Heart University; in non-business programs such as those found in communication and/or continuing education programs at New York University and the University of Washington; and in non-degree certification programs such as those found at Rutgers University. Essentially, all one has to do is look at these programs on the institutional websites to understand the programming specifics.

The mimetic process is truly at work when one peruses the systematic analysis of social media curricula offered by Brocato *et al.* (2015). In this in-depth review of course syllabi, one can discover the following course content from around 90 colleges and universities across the USA: course titles, course objectives, topical coverage, pedagogy, assessment and social media tools. Although these authors capture the high-level course content, other authors provide information which makes mimicry fairly easy. Neier and Zayer (2015) provide details on developing writing skills via blogging, whereas Fowler and Thomas (2015) refer readers to a vast array of experiential learning blogging examples (e.g. group decision making, soft skill development and reflective learning) from which to mimic course projects. Bal *et al.* (2015) provide extensive details on the use of Facebook in the creation and delivery of a social media strategy class exercise, and Northey *et al.* (2015) describe their utilization of Facebook as a tool to facilitate asynchronous learning opportunities. Authors such as Rinaldo *et al.* (2011) and West *et al.* (2015) provide marketing educators with insights into the use of Twitter in the classroom. Spiller and Tuten (2015) discuss how to integrate metrics across the marketing curriculum by incorporating a wide variety of digital activities (blog, tweets, pins, etc.) and interaction activities (bookmarks, views, followers, etc.). As evident by the examples provided, published details on pedagogical developments in the marketing curriculum offers ample opportunities for mimicry to occur.

Mimicry, however, can also arise from tapping into the skillset of a student, a group described by Weber (2013) as a critical stakeholder influencing the curriculum design. Bal *et al.* (2015) delineate the terminology often used when referring to contemporary college students (“net generation”, “digital natives” and “millennials”). Grewal *et al.* (2015) describe these college students as extraordinarily savvy with regards to social

media platforms, with Williams *et al.* (2012) exploring the various social platforms, providers and behaviors of the college students.

Recently, the current authors queried 50 undergraduate business students at two different universities about social media/digital marketing integration within the respective marketing curricula. Although mimicry is an option, given the skillset possessed by these digital natives, little appears to be occurring. Of 50 students engaged in the discussions, one-half of them reported that social media/digital marketing was either not discussed or only mentioned briefly but was never used in their marketing courses. When included in a course, students reported that the tendency was to discuss the concepts, rather than to apply them, with a common complaint being that even the concepts were just glazed over in the class and course textbook. Neier and Zayer (2015) identified concerns about the lack of e-skills among educators, and this is likely reflected in what the students bemoaned as little to no usage in their marketing classrooms.

Interestingly, over half of the students had worked with social media/digital marketing during internships, summer jobs or cooperative education. In these positions, students had used marketing technology for romanticizing products, online campaign development, multiple social media feeds, engaging with influencers, as part of external design teams, legal approvals, search engine optimization, hacking activities and e-mail marketing. Translating this work-related knowledge to the classroom, the students offered several suggestions for curriculum development, including: more analytics and metrics (e.g. software tools), designing and implementing online campaigns, ethical issues, research and writing assignments and taking advantage of external tools (e.g. LinkedIn publishing). Digital/social media marketing material students want the integration of marketing technology into their classes, and a more detailed list of student suggestions is as follows:

- application practice rather than lecturing concepts;
- guidance on writing creatively on social media platforms;
- methods for tracing customers from digital marketing campaigns to purchase;
- techniques linking digital marketing efforts directly to revenues;
- solve real social media cases;
- observe social media marketing tactics of an obscure company;
- more specifics of how companies are taking advantage of social media;
- how social media for companies is different than one's personal social media;
- how to best engage with customers and create awareness;
- how to target specific audiences;
- legal implications of social media/digital marketing gone wrong;
- ethical issues of digital marketing;
- how data can be obtained from websites/platforms;
- more detail on Google/Twitter/Facebook analytics;
- AdWords and search engine optimization;
- key social media marketing trends;
- social media advertising methods;

- digital content marketing;
- video, picture and design;
- further use of LinkedIn;
- social media writing and publishing assignments;
- what causes viral videos to become viral;
- design and implement a social media campaign;
- planning and budgeting for search and ads;
- the most lucrative ways of improving social media marketing;
- hard skills associated with digital/social media marketing;
- software and tools that analyze social media; and
- how startups beginning with no followers can expand their social media presence.

Students recognize the need for greater exposure to social media and digital marketing.

Given the plethora of opportunity, yet lack of embracement, for mimicry, there is a need for a paradigm shift among marketing faculty. The usual and accepted way of doing and thinking about marketing and learning needs to change completely.

Normative pressures

Defining the conditions under which professionalism occurs in an organization leads to standards for which organizations must conform, and this professionalism leads to normative pressures for change. DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 152) interpret professionalism as “the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work” and the “legitimization” of occupational autonomy. Educators face normative pressures to conform to standards set by the society at large, and curriculum updates occur so as to meet the society’s expectations about what graduates of our programs need to know to function successfully in the current business world (Weber, 2013).

The general public has embraced technology, and it is an integral part of daily lives and business strategy (Brocato *et al.*, 2015). As noted by Grewal and Levy (2016, p. 84), “The changes and advances in social, mobile, and online technologies have created a perfect storm, forcing firms to change how they communicate with their customers”. The impact of social interactions on consumers is significant, influencing up to one-third of spending (Chui *et al.*, 2012). Consumer behavior is changing because of technology, and marketers must engage with consumers in the manner best serving the marketplace. Thus, marketing professionalism demands technological expertise.

Also, students expect their college campuses to be technologically sophisticated (Selingo, 2015). Given the amount of money students are paying for their higher education, Stoller (2015) goes so far as to suggest that it is unacceptable for anyone in higher education to not be technologically/digitally enabled. As technology has created a knowledge revolution, students recognize that the skills they learn in the marketing classroom should be transferable to business settings. These aspiring marketing managers expect the curriculum to socialize them “into the norms and mores of the organizations they hope to join” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 153). However, Harrigan and Hulbert (2011, p. 261) offer this quote from a campus recruiter:

We are a big fan of employing graduates, but unfortunately, we aren't seeing the skills we need in marketing graduates – we're employing a lot of stats and IT graduates to do our marketing roles.

Duffy and Ney (2015) confirm this recruiter's accusation and assert that universities are not producing work-ready students who possess relevant and up-to-date knowledge.

Technology as a disruptive force

Both internal and external forces are exerting pressure on the marketing academic community to keep abreast of the current technological marketplace. Technology is increasingly important in both a business and an academic sense. Some business faculty may believe that specific social media tools are too trivial for the classroom. Yet, used properly, most digital/social media tools help develop the needed holistic and long-term skills of: planning, research, organization, analytical thinking, network development and written communication (Atwong, 2015). Additionally, research suggests that the use of social media can stimulate creativity skills (Parise *et al.*, 2015) and foster cross-functional integration (Findlay, 2014).

Unfortunately, less than half of senior college officials believe that their faculty receives adequate support to rethink how to teach courses by using technology (Selingo, 2015). Although corporations around the globe are restructuring their marketing initiatives to utilize digital marketing, many university marketing departments are failing to provide adequate curriculum surrounding marketing technology. Marketing students are left without vital skills needed to enter into marketing roles upon graduation. We contend that the integration of technology into the classroom comes from the forces of institutional isomorphic change. Although these forces are pressuring business schools to include technology in their marketing curriculum, a widespread adoption of this necessary media is yet to follow.

Implications for educators, students and managers

The internet and digital media tools are disruptive forces, and there are three major participants in the technology discussion when looking toward the next generation of business leaders. Each of these participants has a knowledge base that is shaped by isomorphic pressures, and each of the participant groups must contribute to the educational process to make a positive change. The most critical member of the participant group is the educators and the educational institution itself. Starting at the top of the institution, everyone from the board of trustees to the president to the dean of faculty needs to ensure that the campus is technology-enabled. This is no longer an option. Highly functional technology access in every dorm and classroom is a bare necessity in the current world. College campuses should be at the forefront of technological sophistication, as this is supposedly where the great minds of the current and future reside.

With the technology infrastructure in place, the onus is on the teacher to utilize and deliver a high-quality digital experience in and out of the classroom. The educator is surrounded by isomorphic forces from which outstanding teaching and learning opportunities for students can be learned and/or created. There are absolutely no excuses for educators to be behind the curve technologically. Teaching is a life-long learning experience, and teachers cannot stop learning once they are in front of the classroom. In the current world, this type of learning will likely fall in the digital realm. Many colleges and universities offer classes to assist a professor in learning classroom technology, but that is not enough. Educators need to also learn the tools that are being

used in practical applications by organizations of all types. This might mean that the college's technology team hosts training sessions or it might mean that the teacher learns via the online opportunities available from many companies (e.g. Google, Microsoft and Hootsuite). However, the educator must understand and be able to use the tools in practice in our twenty-first century companies.

The educator must also take advantage of the vast wealth of teaching information found in our educational conferences and journals. There are many educators who devote considerable time and energy to share their teaching prowess with the larger community. Examples abound for everything from incorporating technology into the foundation courses to stand-alone courses focused specifically on digital (e.g. digital marketing and marketing analytics). Importantly, digital should not be an option for students. Isomorphic changes have shown that digital is a mandate, a required course if you will, not an elective offering. It is unrealistic to put the decision in the hands of 18–21-year-old students in deciding what should (or not) be learned in a marketing degree.

Recognizing some faculty are conservative and risk adverse, faculty may be defensive or lacking in self-confidence in adopting new methods. However, we believe that by not positively responding to isomorphic pressures, there is a risk of stifling motivation and learning. Students need to learn to think critically regarding which tools might be applied to different situations and to develop appropriate decision criteria. True learning will not simply provide the ability to use a particular social media tool. Using technology (e.g. digital and social media) in the classroom will empower students as self-learners.

Students need to push for change in the curriculum. These digital natives are at the forefront in adopting and using technology. They adopt new tools quickly and easily, and they should take the responsibility of sharing that knowledge in the classroom. Students should not be satisfied with mere discussion of traditional tools or the glazing over of digital marketing and then resorting to the end-of-the-semester course evaluation to express dissatisfaction (or not). Current college students need to learn to take the lead in change and learn, while in college, how to do that professionally.

Finally, managers in the marketplace need to create stronger connections with the academic community. Business school deans and alumni need to facilitate this connectivity. As a force for change, managers should reach out to educators by creating sharing opportunities. This might be in the traditional format of a guest speaking in the classroom or it might be more creative by the way of invitation events (e.g. on-site presentations). However, managers should not wait for the marketing educational process to run its course and then complain that students are not prepared. Preparing the next generation of business leaders is a hand-in-hand journey, and managers have knowledge that should be shared during the journey. We believe that integrating technology into the marketing classroom, by understanding the role of educators, students and managers in isomorphic change, can blend scholarship and hands-on experience to help students maneuver effectively through the high-speed and fast-paced world.

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