

Social media in marketing research: Theoretical bases, methodological aspects, and thematic focus

Fangfang Li¹  | Jorma Larimo¹ | Leonidas C. Leonidou²

¹School of Marketing and Communication, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland

²Department of Business and Public Administration, School of Economics and Management, University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

Correspondence

Fangfang Li, School of Marketing and Communication, University of Vaasa, P.O. Box 700, FI-65101 Vaasa, Finland.
Email: fang.fang.li@uwasa.fi

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Abstract

The widespread use of social media as a marketing tool during the last decade has been responsible for attracting a significant volume of academic research, which, however, can be described as highly fragmented to yield clear directions and insights. We systematically synthesize and critically evaluate extant knowledge of social media marketing extracted from 418 articles published during the period 2009–2021. In doing so, we use an organizing framework focusing on five key areas of social media marketing research, namely, social media as a promotion and selling outlet, social media as a communication and branding channel, social media as a monitoring and intelligence source, social media as a customer relationship management and value cocreation platform, and social media as a general marketing and strategic tool. Within each of these areas, we provide important theoretical, methodological, and thematic insights, as well as future research directions. We also offer useful managerial implications derived from the articles reviewed.

KEYWORDS

customer engagement, customer relationship management, literature review, social media, social media marketing, social media strategy, social media value, social networks, value cocreation

1 | INTRODUCTION

The exponential growth of social media during the last decade has drastically changed the dynamics of firm-customer interactions and transformed the marketing environment in many profound ways.¹

¹Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p.61). Thus, social media differentiates from traditional Web 2.0 in the sense that it includes media aspects (e.g., social presence and media richness) and social processes (e.g., self-presentation and self-disclosure). More recently, Appel et al. (2020) broadened the social media definition by stating that "social media has essentially become almost anything—content, information, behaviors, people, organizations, institutions—that can exist in an interconnected, networked digital environment where interactivity is possible" (p.80). Hence, within a marketing domain, social media

For example, marketing communications are shifting from one to many to one to one, as customers are changing from being passive observers to being proactive collaborators, enabled by social media with connectedness and interactions, regardless of time or location (Hewett et al., 2016). Moreover, the ubiquitous access to information, the low cost of search engines, and the speed of information dissemination are challenging firms with new capabilities to manage their marketing and branding strategies (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Furthermore, empowered customers are now taking control and becoming pseudo-marketers, actively contributing to the firm's

has become a technology-centric ecosystem, which is responsible for rapidly shaping consumer behaviors, interactions, and exchanges (Appel et al., 2020).

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marketing efforts, such as promoting and even selling its products (Harmeling et al., 2017; Malthouse et al., 2013).

These changes stress the need to reassess marketing thought, as the various traditional marketing approaches may no longer be adequate, but have to be adjusted to this new social media era. Marketing researchers (e.g., Kumar et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2017) have swiftly responded to these emerging trends, producing numerous articles aiming to enhance our understanding of the role played by social media in a marketing context, as well as highlighting the multiple opportunities and challenges open to the firm. However, knowledge accumulated on social media marketing has been too fragmented to provide a clear picture on the subject. This has resulted in discrepancies among researchers in the field regarding the specific roles played by social media in marketing, definitional and operationalization issues of the constructs employed, and disjointed academic discourses and implications for practice (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

In the past, there have been several insightful attempts to review the social media marketing literature. For example, Lamberton and Stephen (2016) reviewed and synthesized 160 articles on digital, social media, and mobile marketing published during the period from 2000 to 2015, while Salo's (2017) review of 40 studies assessed the advances in social media marketing research in the industrial marketing field. Notwithstanding their usefulness, these reviews: (a) did not cover an adequate number of articles and focused only on specific dimensions of social media marketing; (b) did not take into consideration recent developments on the subject, despite dramatic changes that have occurred during the last few years; (c) did not examine chronological changes in this line of research, despite the dynamic nature of the social media phenomenon; and (d) did not evaluate the theoretical and methodological aspects of pertinent studies.

There is a need therefore to systematically review, evaluate, and integrate the extant literature on social media marketing that would help to achieve a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the role of social media in marketing and advance knowledge of the subject (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Felix et al., 2017). Specifically, we have four major goals to accomplish: (a) to propose a theoretically-anchored framework to organize the social media marketing literature along key research streams; (b) to assess each of these streams along theoretical, methodological, and thematic grounds, and monitor their evolution over time; (c) to propose valuable directions that would push this domain forward in meaningful ways; and (d) to provide useful managerial implications derived from extant knowledge of the subject.

2 | ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING RESEARCH

We draw on the value creation perspective to introduce our framework for organizing social media marketing research. Recent marketing thought views value as a core concept that is not delivered

or created solely by firms, but always cocreated jointly with customers in resource-integration processes (Vargo et al., 2008). Building on this logic, social media can serve as ideal tools that integrate resources and information between firms and customers, which result in a mutual value creation (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018). Through integration in activities, such as selling, communication, social monitoring, relationship building, and strategy implementation, firms can capture and utilize different values from their social media interactions with customers (Ju et al., 2021). Customers become active value cocreators, by contributing value through various activities, such as crowd-sourcing, user-generated content (UGC), and word-of-mouth (WOM) (Rashid et al., 2019).

Within the context of social media, researchers have identified various types of values created, captured, and utilized by firms, namely, transactional value (Zhang et al., 2017), media value (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), informational value (Nam & Kannan, 2014), relational value (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014), and strategic value (Cartwright et al., 2021). These values can be transferred to customers by firms which strategically use social media to sell (Agnihotri et al., 2017), communicate (Hajli et al., 2017), monitor (Carlson et al., 2018), or empower customers (Malthouse et al., 2013). This strategy-value perspective of social media can help us categorize the extant literature on social media marketing into five research streams, namely: (a) social media as a promotion and selling outlet; (b) social media as a communication and branding channel; (c) social media as a monitoring and intelligence source; (d) social media as a customer relationship management (CRM) and value cocreation platform; and (e) social media as a general marketing and strategic tool (see Table 1).

Studies in the *first* research stream typically adopt a transaction-based perspective, investigating social media usage as a promotion and selling outlet (Agnihotri et al., 2017; Saboo et al., 2016). The *transactional value* of social media is highlighted here, as the promotional and sales role of social media has repeatedly been stressed as affecting customer purchase behavior positively and enhancing the firm's financial outcomes (Ancillai et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). Social media is claimed to be the dominant new selling tool that has changed the way buyers and sellers interact (Marshall et al., 2012). This is because social media offer sellers new opportunities to obtain customer information and make the initial interaction with customers more efficient (Rodriguez et al., 2012). For example, Saboo et al. (2016) revealed the significant impact of customer social media activities (e.g., sampling, following, commenting) on brand sales in a music industry context. Moreover, numerous studies (e.g., Jayson et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2017; Stephen & Galak, 2012) confirmed the significant synergistic effects of paid-media and owned-media (together with other traditional marketing tools) on sales. Furthermore, social influence (e.g., networks) was found to be a strong driver affecting customer purchase intentions (Kumar & Rajan, 2012). In relation to this, Park et al. (2018) confirmed the "social dollars" effect, in which social interaction between online community users increases within-community commerce.

The *second* research stream mainly explores the use of social media as a communication and branding channel, which has a role in

TABLE 1 Key characteristics of social media marketing research streams.

Research stream	Stream 1: Social media as a promotion and selling outlet	Stream 2: Social media as a communication and branding channel	Stream 3: Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source	Stream 4: Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform	Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool
Corresponding marketing functions	Sales management	Marketing communication	Marketing information	Customer relationship	Overall marketing
Fundamental market changes brought by social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New selling opportunity • Synergetic effect • Social dollar effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased consumer power • Firm communications move from one-to-many to one-to-one • Consumer WOM shifts from one to one to one to many 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible and abundant social media data • UGC becomes important data source • Speed of information dissemination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From dyadic to network relationship • From customer lifetime value to customer engagement value • From CRM to social CRM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximize profits and competitive advantage • Overcome resource limitations • Expand geographic reach
Marketing emphasis	Selling	Communication	Monitoring	Relationship management	Marketing strategy
Social media value created	Transactional value	Media value	Informational value	Relational value	Strategic value
Representative firm activities in value cocreation	Selling	Communication	Social monitoring	Relationship building	Strategy implementation
Representative customer activities in value cocreation	Online shopping	Content consuming and creation	Crowd-sourcing	UGC	WOM

Abbreviations: CRM, customer relationship management; UGC, user-generated content; WOM, word-of-mouth.

creating, delivering, and spreading content on social media platforms to communicate with customers and attain a positive brand image (De Vries et al., 2017; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Thus, the *media value* of social media is emphasized as it has become an important and growing vehicle for achieving brand-related advocacy, sustaining trusted brand status, and generating positive WOM (Dwivedi et al., 2019; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Meire et al., 2019). Social media have also altered the nature of marketing communications in this digital era (Hewett et al., 2016). On the one hand, social media have transformed consumers from passive observers to active contributors, as social media reignite the consumer power with increasing customer-led content generation and customer-created product innovations (Labrecque et al., 2013). On the other hand, social media serve as ideal platforms for firms' branding and directly communicating with their customers. For example, firms often use social media communities to reach the customer and facilitate brand value cocreation (Hajji et al., 2017). These social media roles have been responsible for gradually changing corporate communications from "one to many" to "one to one" and consumer WOM from "one to one" to "one to many" (Hewett et al., 2016).

The *third* line of research pays particular attention to social media as a monitoring and information source, with the emphasis being on how to derive *informational value* from social media data, as well as how firms listen promptly, intervene properly, and react appropriately to customer voices (Borah et al., 2020; Moe & Schweidel, 2017). They also emphasize the importance of social media data analytics and usage to better understand market insights and customer needs (e.g., Timoshenko & Hauser, 2019). Recently, social media have become "listening tools" or "windows" for firms to observe and analyze customers (Moe & Schweidel, 2017; Rydén et al., 2015), search for and share information (Drummond et al., 2018), and identify innovation opportunities (Carlson et al., 2018). This is because: (a) as social media data become easily accessible and abundant, it provides firms with great prospects for understanding consumer needs in different contexts and deriving ideas for strategy improvement (Moe & Schweidel, 2017); (b) firms are no longer the primary information source about products or brands, since social media provide valuable UGC at a very low searching cost (Swaminathan et al., 2020); and (c) the speed of information dissemination enabled by social media has seriously altered the dynamics of communication crisis (known as "social media firestorm"), whereby there could be a sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM and/or complaints against a person, company, or group in social media networks (Pfeffer et al., 2014).

The *fourth* research group takes a customer-oriented perspective and highlights the use of social media as a CRM tool and value cocreation platform, mainly dealing with customer engagement, social CRM capabilities, and value cocreation (e.g., Ahani et al., 2017; Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). The emphasis here is on the *relational value* of social media, whereby social media platforms are utilized to connect and engage customers through personalized firm-customer interactions and cocreate value through actions like UGC and

crowdsourcing (e.g., Li et al., 2021). As customers become more empowered, the brand-customer relationship is surpassing dyadic brand relationships to cover a wider stakeholder network (Tajvidi et al., 2020). As a result, customer value is no longer defined by customer lifetime value only, but also by customer engagement value (which refers to voluntary contributions to a firm that go beyond individual transactions) (Harmeling et al., 2017). To broaden its value scope, Kumar et al. (2010) operationalize customer engagement value as comprising customer lifetime value, customer referral value, customer influencer value, and customer knowledge value. Subsequently, the concept of "social CRM" is developed to combine social media data with its CRM system, aiming to build and maintain worldwide customers and relationships in a social media context (Malthouse et al., 2013).

In the *fifth* research stream, social media are conceived as a general strategic marketing tool, with the bulk of studies focusing on the strategic role of social media adoption for marketing purposes, the impact of social media on organizational structure, social media usage and its management, and the strategic marketing perspective of social media (e.g., Lacka & Chong, 2016; Wu et al., 2020). Hence, the emphasis here is on the *strategic value* of social media and their impact on stimulating and shaping strategic thinking in the firm's marketing decisions. Social media can influence marketing strategy in several ways. For example, social media can help to formulate a marketing strategy that expands its geographical reach, because of its power to enhance connections and provide two-way conversations (Li et al., 2021). There is also evidence (e.g., Kumar et al., 2013) showing that social media can be an influential strategic tool that can improve the firm's competitive advantage and profitability. In addition, social media can provide useful means to overcome resource limitations (especially for SMEs) (Brink, 2017), as well as enhance opportunities for new resource configurations (Bianchi & Andrews, 2015).

3 | REVIEW METHOD

Following the approach adopted by review efforts in other marketing fields (e.g., Cleeren et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2021), we systematically searched the pertinent literature on social media marketing having as a basis the previously identified five research streams. Our review process followed five steps: defining the search strategy, screening of search results, obtaining the final sample, coding and categorizing data, and conducting a descriptive analysis (see Figure 1).

3.1 | Step 1: Defining the search strategy

The search strategy mainly includes the selection of databases and keywords to query. To identify relevant articles, we employed various electronic databases (e.g., ScienceDirect, EBSCO, Web of Science, Scopus, ABI, Google Scholar), mainly using the following keywords: "social media marketing," "digital marketing," "social media strategy,"

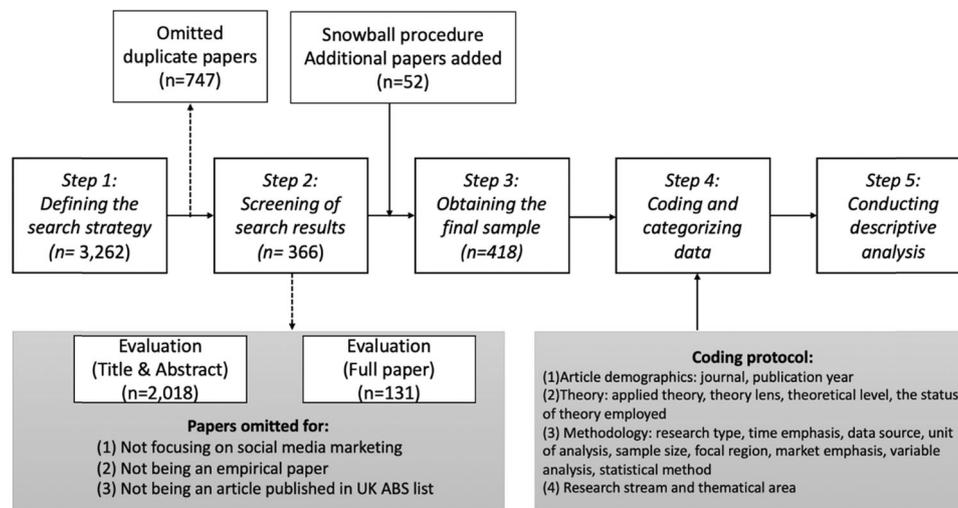


FIGURE 1 Steps in systematic literature search process.

“online marketing,” “social CRM strategy,” “social media engagement,” “social commerce strategy,” “social monitoring strategy,” “social media sales,” “social selling,” “social media promotion,” “social media advertising,” “social media branding,” “social listening,” “content marketing,” “viral marketing,” and “Facebook/Twitter marketing.” We specifically searched for articles that were published since 2009, when the first empirical articles relating to social media marketing began to appear. This electronic search yielded 3262 articles, of which 747 had to be removed due to duplications.

3.2 | Step 2: Screening of search results

For an article to be included in our review, the following eligibility criteria had to be fulfilled: (a) to focus on social media issues relating to marketing, rather than other areas (e.g., IT, human resources, production), as well as to examine these issues from a firm, customer, or other stakeholder perspective; (b) to be of an empirical nature, while those of a purely conceptual, methodological, or other status were excluded; (c) to have an academic article format, while publications in book chapters, doctoral theses, or conference proceedings were excluded; and (d) to have been published in English in academic peer-reviewed journals. To ensure the relevance and quality of our search results, we focused on academic journals included in the UK-based ABS journal-ranking catalog, as this has recorded strong intercorrelation with other journal lists and high consistency with the citation impact factor index (Morris et al., 2009).

3.3 | Step 3: Obtaining the final sample

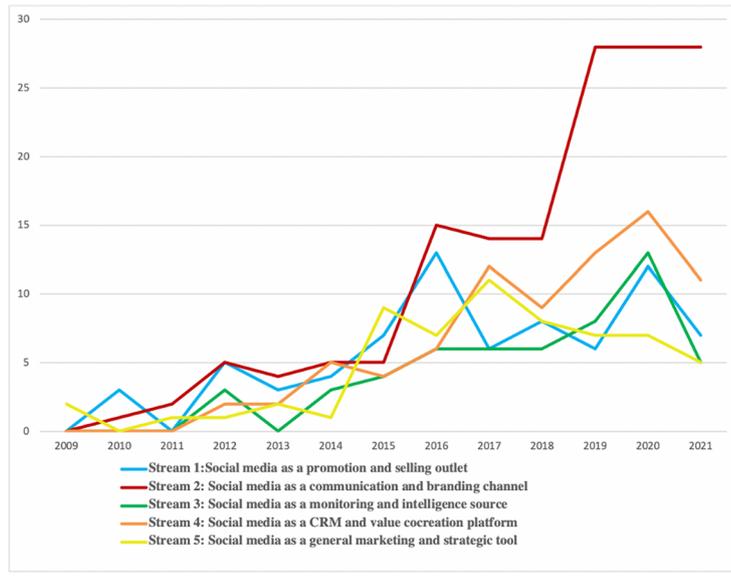
To ensure adherence to the eligibility criteria set, we first carefully read the titles and abstracts of the screened articles to determine whether they were relevant for inclusion. This resulted in excluding 2018 articles that were irrelevant for the purpose of our study. The

remaining articles were read attentively to further determine their eligibility, which led to the exclusion of another 131 articles. The outcome of this process was to have 366 articles that were suitable for further analysis. However, to avoid the possibility of excluding some articles from the electronic search, we manually examined the reference sections of the shortlisted articles, revealing 52 additional articles, thus increasing the size of our final sample to 418.

3.4 | Step 4: Coding and categorizing data

All eligible articles were subsequently analyzed by two coders with substantial knowledge in social media marketing. In doing so, a special coding protocol was prepared to focus on article demographics (e.g., journal name, publication year), theoretical anchoring of the study (i.e., applied theory, theory lens, status of theory employed, theoretical level), research methodology (i.e., research type, time emphasis, data source, unit of analysis, sample size, focal region, market emphasis, variable analysis, statistical method), and research stream and thematic areas covered (i.e., advertising, social commerce, communication, branding, social monitoring, data use, social CRM, value cocreation, social media usage, social media strategies). Both coders undertook rigorous training on how to code the information contained in each article and better understand the specific issues in the coding protocol. For this purpose, a special manual incorporating explanations of the various issues was developed. The two coders worked separately to extract relevant information from the articles selected, under the lead author's close supervision. The two sets of completed coding sheets were subsequently compared and contrasted to identify any differences, revealing an inter-coder reliability rate above 90%–95% for the various issues examined (Rust & Cooil, 1994). The various coding discrepancies were resolved during a joint meeting of the two coders with the supervisor, with the finalized data set used for descriptive statistical analysis.

(a) Numbers of studies in each stream over time



(b) Distribution of themes

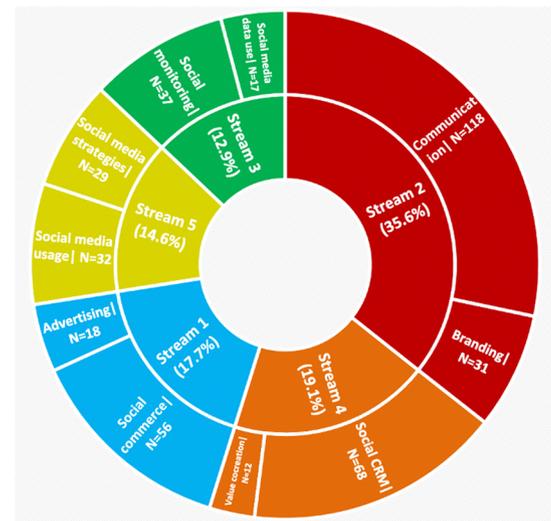


FIGURE 2 Evolution of social media marketing research.

3.5 | Step 5: Conducting descriptive analysis

The final set of articles was derived from 58 different journals relating to marketing (68.2%), management (21.3%), information management (8.6%), or other disciplines (1.9%). In descending order, the top eight contributing journals were: *Journal of Business Research* (19.9%), *Journal of Interactive Marketing* (10.8%), *Industrial Marketing Management* (8.4%), *Journal of Marketing* (8.1%), *Journal of Marketing Research* (4.8%), *European Journal of Marketing* (4.8%), *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (4.1%), and *Psychology & Marketing* (4.1%) (see Appendix 1). Notably, there was a sharp increase in the number of articles focusing on social media marketing, reflecting a strong research interest in capturing the rapid developments in this field. Our analysis revealed that studies on “social media as a communication and branding channel” were the most frequently conducted (35.6%), as opposed to studies falling under the other four research streams, which were carried out on a less frequent basis (<20% each) (see Figure 2).

4 | THEORETICAL BASES

Slightly more than half (52.6%) of the articles reviewed are atheoretic in nature (i.e., adopting no specific theory [or theories]), which can be justified by the fact that social media has remained an emerging topic during the last decade, with most of the studies conducted being data-driven (see Table 2). Atheoretic studies were evident in all five streams of research examined, this being particularly true during the early years of this study. Of those articles using a theory (or theories), the theoretical level most frequently employed (reported by 34.3% of

the articles) referred to personal behavior theories (e.g., “attachment theory”). Social-level theories (e.g., “social capital theory”) were adopted in more than a fifth (21.2%) of the articles, with their use being more evident among studies focusing on a social selling context (e.g., how social learning and interactions influence customer purchase intentions). Firm-level theories (e.g., “resource-based view”) and theories from the media and communication field (e.g., “uses and gratifications theory”) were less frequently applied (reported by 12.6% and 15.7% of the articles reviewed respectively). Other theories, such as those relating to environmental and information stimuli (e.g., “stimulus-organism-response”), were used to a lesser extent.

With regard to the status of the theory employed among the theory-anchored studies, the majority (i.e., 76.8%) of the articles used an existing theory (or theories), while only about one in five articles (i.e., 21.2%) extended an existing theory by adding new constructs, setting new boundaries, or examining new relationships. Researchers have employed a wide range of theories to study the social media marketing phenomenon, the most frequent being “resource-based view,” “uses and gratifications theory,” “social exchange theory,” “social identity theory,” “social capital theory,” “signaling theory,” and “information process theory.” In total, 128 different theories were used, which were applied to explain: (a) firm-to-customer interactions, such as the firm’s social media tactics and strategies (e.g., content marketing); (b) customer-to-firm interactions, such as customer reactions and negative behaviors (e.g., complaints) toward brands; (c) customer-to-customer interactions, such as social influences on others’ online behaviors and WOM; and (d) cause and consequence of interactions, such as the firm’s social media marketing performance.

TABLE 2 Theoretical bases of social media marketing research.

Theoretical bases	Total (n = 418) %	Stream 1: Social media as a promotion and selling outlet (n ₁ = 74) %	Stream 2: Social media as a communication and branding channel (n ₂ = 149) %	Stream 3: Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source (n ₃ = 54) %	Stream 4: Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform (n ₄ = 80) %	Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool (n ₅ = 61) %
Theory lens						
No applied theory	52.6	45.9	58.4	51.9	47.5	54.2
Single theory	32.1	35.1	34.2	31.5	30.0	26.2
Multiple theories	15.3	19.0	7.4	16.6	22.5	19.6
Theoretical level ^a						
Social level theories	21.2	32.5	21.0	11.5	19.0	17.9
Firm level theories	12.6	2.5	4.8	11.5	21.4	32.1
Personal behavior theories	34.3	45.0	37.1	38.5	28.6	17.9
Media and communication theories	15.7	5.0	22.6	15.4	21.4	7.1
Mixed level	10.1	7.5	9.7	15.4	7.1	10.7
Other	6.1	7.5	4.8	7.7	2.5	14.3
Status of theory employed ^a						
Existing theory	76.8	85.0	79.0	69.2	71.4	78.6
Theory extension	21.2	15.0	17.7	26.9	28.6	21.4
New theory development	2.0	-	3.3	3.9	-	-

Abbreviation: CRM, customer relationship management.

^aOnly for theory-anchored papers.

5 | METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The methodological dimensions of the social media marketing articles reviewed are presented in Table 3. The vast majority (77.6%) of them were quantitative-oriented, less than one fifth (17.9%) adopted a qualitative approach, and the remainder (4.5%) used a mixed-method approach. This is consistent with the general tendency in the traditional marketing discipline to pursue mainly quantitative research in gaining insights into new marketing phenomena. Overall, cross-sectional studies played a dominant role in social media marketing research, while the observation of ongoing changes, events, evolutions, and movements across a series of time points took place on a less-frequent basis. However, there were research areas, such as social selling, content marketing, and social listening, where longitudinal data also played an equally important role. To some extent, this can be attributed to the availability of social media data on a continuous basis that allows researchers to overcome the time and financial constraints imposed by traditional longitudinal research.

With regard to data sources, survey data was the major source employed (reported by 28.4% of the articles), which can be attributed

to their greater availability and easier accessibility. This was followed by data obtained from social media platforms (23.4%), experimental data (11.5%), and in-depth interviews (8.9%). Notably, 19.9% of the studies used data obtained from different sources, which is a positive sign because it permits a more global perspective of the research problem. In more than two-fifths (41.9%) of the articles reviewed, the unit of analysis was the individual consumer (i.e., using consumer behavior data), followed by data obtained at the firm level (through interviews/surveys with company managers) (27.8%), and information extracted from social media content (18.9%). Slightly more than a third (34.4%) of the articles reviewed were conducted in a B2C context, about a fifth (21.1%) took place in a B2B context, while the remainder (41.9%) provided no specific indication concerning market focus.

With regard to geographic focus, about a fifth (20.8%) of the articles on social media marketing were conducted in North America (particularly the USA), followed by Europe (16.0%) and Asia (16.0%). This reflects the great advancements in social media marketing activities taking place in these countries as a result of intensified usage of various types of social media and rapid developments in related technologies (Gong et al., 2017). This

TABLE 3 Methodological aspects of social media marketing research.

Methodological aspects	Total (n = 418) %	Stream 1: Social media as a promotion and selling outlet (n ₁ = 74) %	Stream 2: Social media as a communication and branding channel (n ₂ = 149) %	Stream 3: Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source (n ₃ = 54) %	Stream 4: Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform (n ₄ = 80) %	Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool (n ₅ = 61) %
Research type						
Quantitative	77.6	89.2	80.5	83.4	73.7	55.7
Qualitative	17.9	8.1	16.8	9.3	21.3	36.1
Mixed	4.5	2.7	2.7	7.3	5.0	8.2
Time emphasis						
Cross-sectional	70.3	59.5	69.1	57.4	86.2	78.7
Longitudinal	29.7	40.5	30.9	42.6	13.8	21.3
Data source						
Social media data	23.4	9.5	36.1	44.4	7.5	11.5
Survey	28.4	36.4	19.5	5.6	48.8	34.3
Interview	8.9	5.4	6.7	-	11.3	23.0
Experimental	11.5	8.1	12.8	22.2	11.3	3.3
Direct firm data	1.9	6.8	2.0	-	-	-
Mixed	19.9	18.9	19.5	22.2	16.1	24.6
Other	6.0	14.9	3.4	5.6	5.0	3.3
Unit of analysis						
Firm level	27.8	32.4	16.8	9.3	21.3	73.8
Individual level	41.9	44.6	43.6	37.0	63.6	9.8
Social media content	18.9	2.7	30.2	38.8	6.3	9.8
Other	11.4	20.3	9.4	14.9	8.8	6.6
Sample size						
99 or less	15.6	9.5	13.4	3.7	16.3	37.7
100–249	13.4	9.5	5.4	11.1	27.5	21.3
250–499	17.0	14.9	16.1	18.5	20.0	16.4
500 or more	54.0	66.1	65.1	66.7	36.2	24.6
Focal region						
North America	20.8	33.7	18.1	22.2	20.0	11.5
Europe	16.0	12.2	12.1	24.1	15.0	24.6
Asia	16.0	27.0	12.8	5.6	20.0	14.8
Africa	1.4	-	0.7	-	1.3	6.6
Australia	2.6	-	2.7	5.6	2.5	3.3
Latin America	0.7	1.4	-	-	1.3	1.6
Mixed	10.0	10.8	12.1	7.4	7.5	9.8
Not specified	32.5	14.9	41.5	35.1	32.4	27.8
Market emphasis						
B2C	34.4	20.3	39.6	40.7	21.3	24.6
B2B	21.1	41.8	15.4	11.1	17.5	49.2

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Methodological aspects	Total (n = 418) %	Stream 1: Social media as a promotion and selling outlet (n ₁ = 74) %	Stream 2: Social media as a communication and branding channel (n ₂ = 149) %	Stream 3: Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source (n ₃ = 54) %	Stream 4: Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform (n ₄ = 80) %	Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool (n ₅ = 61) %
Other (e.g., nonprofit)	2.6	4.1	4.0	1.9	–	1.6
Not specified	41.9	33.8	41.0	46.3	61.2	24.6
Variable analysis ^a						
Descriptive statistics	0.6	–	–	2.2	–	2.9
Uni/bivariate analysis	13.6	7.6	15.0	24.4	10.2	11.8
Multivariate analysis	85.8	92.4	85.0	73.4	89.8	85.3
Statistical method ^a						
Regression-based analysis	26.5	28.8	29.2	13.3	22.0	38.2
(PLS-)SEM	24.1	27.3	16.7	6.7	44.0	32.4
Analytical economic/ statistical models	10.5	10.6	13.3	15.6	1.7	8.8
Analysis of (co) variance	10.8	6.1	12.5	24.4	6.8	2.9
Time-series models	5.3	10.6	3.3	8.9	1.7	3.3
Mixed method analyses	15.4	12.1	19.2	13.3	15.3	11.8
Other	7.4	4.5	5.8	17.8	8.5	2.6

Abbreviation: CRM, customer relationship management.

^aOnly for quantitative studies

contrasts with the relatively little research conducted in other geographic regions, such as Australia (2.6%), Africa (1.4%), and Latin America (0.7%).

With the exception of a small proportion of articles using descriptive and uni/bivariate analytical methods (0.6% and 13.6%, respectively), the remainder employed more advanced statistical approaches, particularly regression analysis (26.5%) and structural equation modeling (24.1%), indicating an increasing sophistication of the analysis employed. A notable trend here is the increasing use of analytical economic models, analysis of (co) variance, and time-series models, usually associated with studies dealing with complicated data sources. This reflects the growing complexity of the social media marketing phenomenon and the need to examine more thoroughly the associations between the variables involved.

6 | THEMATIC FOCUS

Table 4 provides an overview of the key thematic areas examined by the articles for each of the five streams of social media marketing research, which are discussed in more detail in the following.

6.1 | Social media as a promotion and selling outlet

With the increasing use of social media in selling products and services, several studies focused on how social media affect sales or customer purchase behaviors. For example, Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2015) study dealt with the "Twitter effect," suggesting that microblogging WOM shared through Twitter strongly affects early product adoption behaviors, especially for experiential media products. Several studies also emphasized the synergetic effects between social media and traditional media (e.g., press mentions, television, in-store promotions) on sales. For example, Spotts et al. (2014) showed an interactive relationship between traditional television advertising and social media conversations. However, this synergistic effect is not necessarily the outcome of cross-media marketing (Kolarici & Vakratsas, 2018). For example, Dost et al. (2019) tested the interaction between social media seeding programs and traditional marketing tools in the fast-moving consumer goods industry and found that seeding programs interact positively with various promotional activities, but negatively with advertising.

Social media is a double-edged sword that can sometimes harm firms. For example, the perceived intrusiveness of social media

TABLE 4 Thematic focus of social media marketing research.

Research stream	Theme	Subtheme	Specific issues addressed
Stream 1: Social media as a promotion and selling outlet ($n_1 = 74$)	Advertising ($n_{1a} = 18$)	Advertising effectiveness ($n_{1a1} = 15$)	Click-through rate; Sponsored ad; Perceived privacy; Ad avoidance
		Multichannel ($n_{1a2} = 3$)	Synergetic effects; Cross-media consumption; Multi-screen
	Social commerce ($n_{1b} = 56$)	Social media selling ($n_{1b1} = 36$)	Social selling; Social coupon; Sales performance; Brand sales; Sales management; Pricing strategy; Premium; Paywall; Promotion strategy
		Customer buying ($n_{1b2} = 20$)	Purchase intention; Social shopping; Group buying; Social dollar
Stream 2: Social media as a communication and branding channel ($n_2 = 149$)	Communication ($n_{2a} = 118$)	Content marketing ($n_{2a1} = 79$)	Firm-generated content; UGC; Social content; Message strategy; Content popularity; Content effectiveness; Video content; Image content; Content readability; Content strategy; Celebrity endorsement
		Viral marketing ($n_{2a2} = 25$)	Seeding strategy; Spillover effects; Influencer marketing; WOM; (Re)broadcasting; Social network
		Communication strategy ($n_{2a3} = 14$)	Brand communications; Corporate communication; Earned, owned, gained media; Communication style; Communication effectiveness
	Branding ($n_{2b} = 31$)	Corporate social responsibility (CSR) ($n_{2b1} = 4$)	Social responsibility; Social presence
		Branding and performance ($n_{2b2} = 27$)	Branding strategy; Brand attachment; Brand endorsement; Brand image; Brand presence; Brand equity; Earned media; Online reputation
Stream 3: Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source ($n_3 = 54$)	Social monitoring ($n_{3a} = 37$)	Social listening ($n_{3a1} = 8$)	Negative WOM; Negative buzz; Social chatter; Customer voice; Online complaint; Online sentiment; Monitoring
		Social responding ($n_{3a2} = 29$)	Crisis management; Response strategy; Web-care; Marketing intervention; Complaint handling; Recall
	Social media data use ($n_{3b} = 17$)	Data analytic ($n_{3b1} = 12$)	Data mining; Machine learning; Sentiment analysis; Social media semantics; Visual data analytics; Artificial intelligence
		Data use ($n_{3b2} = 5$)	Information value; Innovation; New product success; Ethics
Stream 4: Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform ($n_4 = 80$)	Social CRM ($n_{4a} = 68$)	Customer engagement ($n_{4a1} = 41$)	Firm initiatives; Customer attachment; Customer motivation; Experiential engagement
		Relationship management ($n_{4a2} = 27$)	Customer management; Relationship building; Relationship quality; Customer segmentation; Social CRM capability; Target audience; System integration
	Value cocreation ($n_{4b} = 12$)	Value creation ($n_{4b1} = 3$)	Crowdsourcing; Online community; Referral reward program
		Value cocreation ($n_{4b2} = 9$)	UGC; Storyteller; Ecosystem; Co-innovation; Brand advocacy
Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool ($n_5 = 61$)	Social media usage ($n_{5a} = 32$)	Social media adoption ($n_{5a1} = 22$)	Use; Barrier; Challenge; Antecedents; Social media value; Role; Objectives

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Research stream	Theme	Subtheme	Specific issues addressed
		Social media impact ($n_{5a2} = 10$)	Social media impact; Social media influence; Organizational changes; Firm value; Stock market; Carryover effects
	Social media strategies ($n_{5b} = 29$)	Strategy implementation ($n_{5b1} = 19$)	Social media management; Resource; Capability; Competitiveness
		Social media performance ($n_{5b2} = 10$)	Outcomes; Social media effectiveness; Market performance; Financial performance; Competitive advantage; Metrics

Abbreviations: CRM, customer relationship management; UGC, user-generated content; WOM, word-of-mouth.

advertising can have a negative impact on customer behavior, causing irritation and even leading to advertising avoidance (Lin & Kim, 2016). Some scholars (e.g., Rohm et al., 2013) also claimed that excessive sales promotions through social media can negatively influence loyal customers and lead to a decrease in their lifetime value. The ubiquitous social media can also raise privacy and data security concerns. In relation to this, Tucker (2014) highlighted the fact that perceived privacy concerns may lead consumers to resist advertising appeals. Privacy concerns can also negatively influence customer engagement behaviors, because they reduce their intention to share information on social media (Mosteller & Poddar, 2017).

6.2 | Social media as a communication and branding channel

Social media content has been a key research area in social media marketing studies, mainly because social media can help increase brand awareness and popularity in a less expensive and faster way than traditional advertising (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). Content characteristics that positively affect customer referral behaviors include: emotional rather than informational appeals (Akpınar & Berger, 2017); emphasis on specific emotions (e.g., awe, anger, anxiety) (Berger & Milkman, 2012); vividness (e.g., presenting colorful pictures) (Colicev et al., 2019) and interactivity (e.g., raising challenging questions) (De Vries et al., 2012); persuasiveness, demonstrated by argument quality, postpopularity, and postattractiveness (Chang et al., 2015); and demand-based scarcity and personalization (Koch & Benlian, 2015). One concern regarding firms' effectiveness in social media content marketing is the potential misfit between produced content and social media users, indicating that firms should produce appealing content that conforms to the preferences of their target audience (Zhang et al., 2017).

While social media content effectiveness has gained much attention, the importance of content dissemination has also been heavily studied, especially in relation to viral marketing, influencer marketing, and eWOM. With regard to viral marketing, research (e.g., Choi et al., 2018) revealed that content disclosure timing and brand prominence have a positive effect on consumers' intention to share entertainment content. In addition, Liu-Thompkins (2012) suggests

that, instead of simply choosing seeds with a wide reach, marketers should focus on seed consumers who have strong relational ties with the seeding company. Research on influencer marketing has also grown rapidly, with this becoming a new form of marketing communications strategy, since it is considered to be more organic and authentic to receive content from an influencer (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Studies on influencer marketing focused on various issues, such as, the pervasiveness, the selection and activation, and the impact of the influencer (Ye et al., 2021). With regard to eWOM, the emphasis was on the complexity of WOM behaviors (especially negative ones) in a networked world, as communal WOM does not simply increase or expand marketing content, but can also alter the meaning of the messages sent by the firm (Kozinets et al., 2010).

6.3 | Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source

Firms' proactive listening and interactions with customers significantly influence their online behaviors (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Though listening to social media comments is a good way to collect customer sentiments, the metrics of listening platforms may be misleading if differences between venues are not taken into consideration (Schweidel & Moe, 2014). It was also found that firm responsiveness (i.e., volume and speed) also influences customer reactions to social media (Proserpio & Zervas, 2017). Taking into consideration the damage caused by negative eWOM on social media, a number of researchers focused on how firms can appropriately respond to customer online complaints and requests. For example, Coyle et al. (2012) showed that problem-solving responses are better than empathetic responses in strengthening customer's perception of trustworthiness and benevolence.

Although social media data offer great opportunities for gleaning consumer insights, their voluminous, unstructured, and network nature makes their analysis a rather challenging task (Moe & Schweidel, 2017). Different techniques have been proposed to overcome this challenge. For example, Feit et al. (2013) suggested a method that combines individual-level data with aggregated data, which helps firms monitor multiplatform data usage. Moreover, Homburg et al. (2015) recommended that firms can adopt sentiment

measures as a way to assess consumers' reactions, evaluate the prosperity of social media marketing initiatives, and allocate organizational resources to different types of conversations and customer groups. Furthermore, by integrating image, text, and social tagging data from social media, Klostermann et al. (2018) introduced a two-step approach to cluster, aggregate, and map brand-related UGC, to gain meaningful customer insights.

6.4 | Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform

The locus of value creation has shifted from the firm to customers or community, as individuals are empowered to influence brands through social media (Wang et al., 2016). Several studies (e.g., Hajli et al., 2017) particularly emphasized the power of crowds and focused on value creation in a social media community context. While social media brand community provides customers with topical information exchange, identity communication, and establishment and internalization of cultural norms (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017), the social identity and support received from the brand community help to improve customers' brand trust and satisfaction and further increase the likelihood of brand cocreation (Wang et al., 2016). Wang and Kim (2017) also found that a firm's social CRM capabilities are positively correlated with customer engagement levels, thus influencing firm performance.

Despite the fact that the importance of customer engagement and cocreation has been extensively stressed in the pertinent literature, the degree of their contribution is debatable because the firm's engagement initiatives are not always positive. For example, Beckers et al. (2018) reported that firm-initiated customer engagement, such as asking customers to like the company's brands on Facebook, might be risky and decrease brand market value. Grewal et al. (2019) also argued that firms should be careful in encouraging customers' social media posting actions, as they find that posts of identity-relevant products can lead to reduced purchase intentions. In similar vein, customer cocreation does not always lead to positive results. For example, Heidenreich et al. (2015) revealed that customer cocreation generates a greater negative disconfirmation with customers' expected value in a failure service context, while Tajvidi et al. (2020) found that privacy concerns may be an obstacle to brand cocreation.

6.5 | Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool

As social media become powerful marketing and strategic tools, many studies have examined the drivers, influencing factors, and consequences of social media adoption/usage within organizations. For example, Siamagka et al. (2015) found that social media adoption by B2B firms is significantly affected by perceived usefulness, which is determined by image, ease of use, and knowledge barriers. This is

consistent with the findings of Rydén et al.'s (2015) study that social media usage largely depends on the decision-maker's business logic, which leads to totally different social media marketing objectives. Recent studies also emphasize the importance of resources and capabilities required to effectively implement social media marketing strategies. For example, Mahmoud et al. (2020) identified various capabilities (including relational and informational) that facilitate the successful deployment and transformation of social media marketing-related resources.

There are also a number of concerns associated with the integration of social media with the firm's marketing strategies. For example, the lack of employee motivation, insufficient leadership, and knowledge shortage were reported as some of the key barriers to use social media as a general marketing tool (Brink, 2017). Balancing standardization and localization of social media marketing strategies across foreign markets is another issue of concern. For example, Bianchi and Andrews (2015) explored the adoption of social media in Latin America and found that the key obstacles faced by Chilean marketing managers to adopt social media are the costly new technology and the existence of a limited financial budget. This indicates that there is a need for international firms to clearly define the extent to which their social media marketing practices should be standardized or adapted to the needs of the foreign markets that they operate (Lin et al., 2017).

7 | FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

7.1 | Theoretical directions

Despite extensive research interest in social media marketing, the theoretical development of this field is rather limited. In fact, our review has shown that most of the studies conducted are relatively atheoretic, while specific theories that can comprehensively explain the integration of social media with marketing are not yet available. This does not necessarily mean that new theories need to be developed, but rather to incorporate into already existing relevant theories new insights (e.g., social media interactions, social networks, value cocreation) that would have the potential to provide a better understanding of the social media marketing phenomenon. Better conceptualizations and operationalizations could also benefit theoretical development in this field. Our analysis revealed that key constructs used in this line of research (e.g., customer engagement) still lack theoretical substantiation and standardized measurement scales. There is a need therefore to pay more attention to construct operationalization, as in the case of "social media branding" which has recently gained growing importance within the social media marketing field.

Our review has also shown that at the moment there is a heavy emphasis on consumer-oriented theories derived from social psychology (e.g., "social capital theory") and personal behavior (e.g., "elaboration likelihood model"), while there was a limited use of firm-level theories (e.g., "resource-based view") to explain the firm's

involvement in social media marketing activities. Hence, an integration of consumer with firm aspects in the form of “multilevel” theories could yield a better understanding of social media marketing issues and challenges. There is also a need to use some other important firm-level theories, like “knowledge theory,” “organizational learning theory,” and “innovation adoption theory,” that could provide more insights into the role of social media in strategic marketing issues. In addition, the fact that some of the theories used were derived from the mass media communications field, where the focus was on traditional media (e.g., “uses and gratification theory”), necessitates adjustments to better capture the idiosyncrasies of social media.

Understanding the process of value creation is central to the use of social media for marketing purposes. Extending this value creation logic to the realm of social media marketing has led to the emergence of interdisciplinary research streams, such as providing an intersection between innovation and entrepreneurship. Such interdisciplinary actions are suggested to be further developed in the future in light of the multifaceted and complex nature of the social media marketing phenomenon. Moreover, advances in digital technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence, augmented reality [AR], virtual reality [VR]) could broaden the scope of such interdisciplinary initiatives, as in the case of “avatar marketing” (virtual influencers), which provides a fertile ground for novel theory building that takes into consideration the impacts of new technology development (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022; Miao et al., 2022). Furthermore, the fact that the recent Covid-19 pandemic has given an extra boost to social media as a powerful marketing tool, underscoring the important role of social influencers and content creators, necessitates the adoption of theories focusing on how consumers' buying behaviors are affected by these powerful individuals (Pozharliev et al., 2022).

7.2 | Methodological directions

From a methodological perspective, there are several areas requiring attention and improvement. Given that the vast majority of the social media marketing studies reviewed adopted a quantitative approach, the use of in-depth qualitative studies (e.g., case studies, netnography, grounded theory) can bring in more diverse perspectives and provide contextual explanations for many of the challenges currently faced in social media marketing practice. To obtain a more rich, all-round picture of this new phenomenon, the adoption of a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights is highly recommended (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Moreover, since social media data enables firms to identify meaningful customer behavior patterns and market trends, which can help to proliferate customer service and promote product innovation, future research should make greater use of data mining techniques with the help of new technologies to gain more accurate data. Furthermore, given the fact that most studies relied solely on data extracted from social media, it would be useful to combine these with data extracted from other sources (e.g., firm's annual reports or websites), as well

as encourage complementing subjective information with objective data.

Most of the studies reviewed focused on the domestic market, which means that the roles of cultural, economic, and regulatory differences across countries are not fully evaluated. Hence, a cross-country research design would be enlightening in this respect. Also, more attention needs to be paid to social media marketing variations in a B2C versus a B2B context, due to vast differences in buying behavior between consumer and business buyers. It would also be interesting to investigate differences in social media marketing strategies as a result of focusing on different product involvement (e.g., high vs. low), social media platforms (e.g., Facebook vs. Twitter), and digital devices (e.g., computer vs. mobile). To better assess the results of social media marketing activities, it is important to move away from a purely one-level analysis (either consumer-level or firm-level) to a multilevel method approach, connecting input derived from consumers, firms, and the contextual environment where the firm-consumer interactions take place.

Given the dynamic nature of social media interactions, there is a need to introduce new methodologies (e.g., real-time longitudinal social media tracking method) that would help to understand how certain issues (e.g., eWOM) evolve across different platforms or channels, between different actors, and over time (Rust et al., 2021). More explicit and fine-grained metrics are also urgently needed to measure key social media marketing constructs, such as customer engagement behaviors (e.g., quantifying engagement levels), social media use (e.g., capturing usage intensity), and value objectives (e.g., evaluating brand equity) (Borah et al., 2020). It is also important to employ more advanced and specialized tools for data analysis. For example, the use of a multi-facet item response approach to simultaneously examine attribute-rating consumer data by customers would be particularly useful in “big data” analysis (Peng et al., 2019).

7.3 | Thematic directions

Table 5 provides a list of research questions that need to be addressed in each of the five streams identified in this review, while a more detailed analysis of thematic areas where future research should focus is provided in the following.

Despite the usefulness of the research stream focusing on “social media as a promotion and selling outlet,” measurement of the firm's performance was mainly at the product/market level, as opposed to that pertaining to customers, employees, or other stakeholders, which is also vital to know. Future research should also provide a more complete view regarding the link between social selling and performance, such as how different social selling tactics lead to different relational performance levels or how social selling strategies at the organizational level impact on individual salesperson social selling performance (Ancillai et al., 2019). The effective management of social media commerce requires careful attention to advertisement intrusiveness issues, as there is an observed tendency among customers to avoid watching social

TABLE 5 Indicative future research questions in each research stream.

Research stream	Representative research questions
Stream 1: Social media as a promotion and selling outlet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the accuracy/appropriateness of advertisement targeting quality impact advertisement avoidance? • How to deliver tailored but less intrusive advertisement to consumers? • How to better observe and track the results of incentivized social sharing behaviors? • How do different social selling tactics lead to different relational outcomes (e.g., customer acquisition, building and maintaining long-term relationships)? • To what extent can social media activities be automated using new technologies? • What is the role of new technologies (e.g., AR) and their impacts on customer behavior?
Stream 2: Social media as a communication and branding channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the role of earned and owned media in new product release? • How does perceived credibility impact communication outcomes? • What are the impacts of unexplored content features and attributes (e.g., visual features, visual complexity, level of creativity) on customer sharing? • How to capture the changes of (negative) WOM/UGC over time using dynamic approaches? • How to understand the roles of individuals as brand extensions? • How negotiation and compensation processes affect the effectiveness of CSR in social media?
Stream 3: Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do different factors (e.g., past service quality, credibility of complainers, message consensus, individual propensity to complain) influence the effectiveness of response strategies? • What are the consequences of deleting negative posts? • What factors (e.g., different response formats) influence the effectiveness of crisis management and the construction of customer trust? • How does employee empowerment moderate the relationship between firm intervention and firm value? • How can image/video data derived from new technologies (e.g., AR) be used as information/innovation sources? • How do privacy and ethical concerns affect consumer's engagement with brand/advertisement?
Stream 4: Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do social media brand-customer relationships evolve over time? • How to integrate social media data with an existing database for segmentation purposes? • How to ensure the validity and reliability of customer segmentation based on social media data? • How to target and predict consumer behaviors with regard to social media? • How do different new technologies (e.g., AR, VR) impact on CRM? • How can firms tailor content/experience for their target audience? • How do new technologies (e.g., AI) help firms to provide personalized services to customers?
Stream 5: Social media as a general strategic tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of social media marketing adoption on employees or other stakeholders of the organization? • How can social media marketing encourage collaboration between and integration with enterprise functional areas (e.g., production, IT, R&D) to yield optimal results? • How does firm's social media (digital) capability influence market performance? • How does organizational structure, resources, capabilities enable and constrain social media strategy competitiveness? • How do competitors interact with each other in social media communications? • What is the role of standardization versus localization strategies in a global social media marketing context? • To what extent are certain social media marketing strategies affected by foreign social or cultural factors?

Abbreviations: AI, artificial intelligence; AR, augmented reality; CRM, customer relationship management; CSR, corporate social responsibility; UGC, user-generated content; VR, virtual reality; WOM, word-of-mouth.

media advertisements (Lin & Kim, 2016). The role of new technologies (e.g., the use of AR), aiming to enhance the online shopping experience and influence customer decision-making, also needs additional research attention. The same is also true as regards why and how new technologies impact the customer's journey through social media (Ancillai et al., 2019).

Although research on “social media as a communication and branding channel” has attracted the greatest research attention, the bulk of studies focused on what content characteristics trigger customer positive or negative reactions. To counterbalance this, future research should proceed with generalizations across different content marketing practices. Another issue that warrants

attention pertains to the increasingly significant role of multi-channel communication using social media and how this can be measured. For example, marketing research would benefit from the insights on the effectiveness of standardized versus adapted communication strategies in multiple social media channels, as well as the possible spillover effects of one channel on other channels (Borah et al., 2020; Johnston et al., 2018). Future studies can also look at the determinants/influencing factors of diffusion process, such as social relationship characteristics, specific campaign characteristics, network dynamics, cocreation, and the strength of structural ties (e.g., Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Herhausen et al., 2019). It would be beneficial for branding research to investigate the role of brand networks on social media platforms, with a particular emphasis on cofollowership patterns and co-branding (Malhotra & Bhattacharyya, 2022).

Within the “social media as a monitoring and intelligence source” stream of research, studies on social listening and social media data use have received limited research attention. This can be attributed to the recent introduction of social media as a listening tool, and the inexistence of knowledge necessary to convert voluminous and unstructured social media data into actionable strategic insights (Moe & Schweidel, 2017). Notably, inconsistencies among empirical findings require clarification by future research. For example, while most studies (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Herhausen et al., 2019) support modest response strategies, Scholz and Smith (2019) claim that firms can benefit from fighting back online in cases of crisis communication. Paying greater attention to new techniques concerning social media data collection, analysis, and usage is also justifiable, as knowledge of this issue is limited. Future studies should specifically shed light on how new machine learning algorithms and techniques can capture visual data, as well as how these data can be used for innovation purposes (Giglio et al., 2020; Kaiser et al., 2020). It would also be useful to examine how consumers deal with privacy and ethical concerns in various social media contexts and how this in turn impacts customer engagement behaviors (Labrecque et al., 2020).

Within the context of “social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform” research, future studies should embark on understanding the characteristics of brand–customer relationships in social media, particularly focusing on the evolution of these relationships (Agnihotri et al., 2017). Social media aspects also need to be integrated into the firm's CRM system by focusing, for example, on the drivers, processes, and outcomes of social CRM strategies (Ogilvie et al., 2018). In light of the increasingly heterogeneous consumer preferences and the diversification of social media platforms, more research needs to be channeled into how firms (re)target and segment their customers based on social media data to offer more personalized service/experiences and create more customer value (Srinivasan et al., 2016). A more holistic approach is also required to understand the antecedents and consequences of customer engagement as the desired outcome of social CRM and the same is also true with regard to the phenomena of social media crowdsourcing and cocreation.

Finally, with regard to “social media as a general marketing and strategic tool,” this study stream has so far provided only scattered

coverage on how to use social media strategically. As such, future research needs to shed light on issues pertaining to strategy formulation, implementation, and control. In line with this, it is also important to expand research scope at an international level by focusing on issues such as the role of contextual factors on formulating foreign marketing strategies (e.g., standardization vs. localization). Another fundamental flaw in this line of research is the limited integration of social media marketing with the firm's overall marketing strategy and how this works synergistically with organizational structure and the various components of the marketing mix. Future studies should focus, for example, on the organization's structural changes associated with social media adoption and how organizational structure enables/constrains social media performance (Kwayu et al., 2018). The role of collaboration and integration with other enterprise functions (e.g., production, operations, research and development) on social media strategy effectiveness also warrants attention (Chahine & Malhotra, 2018). Future research can also take a closer look on how competitors' movements influence the formulation of a social media marketing strategy, as well as affect various segmentation and targeting decisions (De Vries et al., 2017).

8 | MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The insights gained from the previous review of the social media marketing literature can provide useful guidance to marketers seeking to align their social media strategies with a broad range of tactical and strategic marketing objectives. These are summarized in Table 6, based on the fivefold classification of social media marketing strategies, while a more detailed analysis is provided in the following.

Using social media as a selling platform underscores the key role played by salespeople. Like offline shopping, many customers still rely on their salespersons' ability to offer product information, provide professional opinion, and deliver services to customers (Ogilvie et al., 2018). Therefore, a good starting point for firms could be to promote social media for business purposes, providing salesperson training on how to use social media professionally in their tasks, as well as how to increase job effectiveness and efficiency by employing social media. Firms can also apply a range of tools to stimulate social selling. For instance, they could embark on promotional campaigns based on social coupons that would allow to generate new customers through social sharing (without any monetary investment). Through the use of emerging new technologies (e.g., AR and VR), celebrity endorsement, and engaging advertisements, they could also strengthen online shopping activities and improve conversion rates.

Although interactivity, infotainment, and credibility have been proposed to significantly impact customer attitudes and behavioral intentions during the social media communication process, there is never a one-size-fits-all message for brands (Majid et al., 2019). Hence, firms should tailor their communications to fit the specific requirements of each target group, by achieving harmony between product attributes and social media users. For example, utilitarian brands may benefit from clearer and more readable messages, while

TABLE 6 Managerial lessons derived from social media marketing research.

Research stream	Topics	Managerial lessons extracted
Stream 1: Social media as a promotion and selling outlet	Advertising effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the interactivity of advertising to engage customers • Reach out customers with highly targeted and individually customized messages • Generate advertisement trust through celebrity endorsement • Consider platform differences when advertising on social media
	Social selling and performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote personal use of social media, providing social media expertise training • Attract customer referrals with easier access and more rewards to stimulate new deal purchases • Encourage group buying by highlighting deal value (e.g., social coupon) and popularity • Set social selling goals and metrics, and integrate social selling into the selling process
	New tech and customer's decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply emerging technologies (e.g., AR) to facilitate customer's online shopping • Provide technological sales tools (e.g., marketing automation software) to assist social selling • Design new social shopping experiences through emerging technologies (e.g., wearables) • Improve conversion rates through deeper dive into user data and predictive analysis
Stream 2: Social media as a communication and branding channel	Communication tactics and strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrich content communication with interactivity, infotainment, and credibility • Tailor company communications to specific target groups in social media • Provide a fit between product attributes and targeted social media users • Embark on collaborative communication and maintain high communication quality standards
	Content, influencer marketing, and viral marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key influencers to better diffuse the message to target audience • Combine synergistically online and traditional offline media • Use viral marketing strategy and seed through highly connected persons • Foster eWOM through UGC
	Branding and CSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize consumers to share their positive brand experiences in social media communities • Build brand image through social responsibility initiatives • Generalize global brand strategy but specialize social media dialogs in local culture • Offer two-way dialog with stakeholders to create openness and transparency
Stream 3: Social media as a monitoring and intelligence source	Response strategy and crisis management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a clear social media presence and communication style • Design response strategies to accommodate customer complaints (e.g., apologies or compensation) • Develop a sound warning system to manage social media firestorms • Monitor social media WOM to detect changes and prevent potential crises
	Social media data collection, analysis, and usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop social media analytics processes and capabilities • Use machine learning technologies to detect and group relevant data (e.g., WOM) • Analyze UGC for capturing innovation opportunities • Sense and respond to market changes through social media data analysis
	Privacy and ethical concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be careful and transparent in using the personal data collected • Devote efforts to build customer trust (e.g., secure payment systems) • Engage user participation and provide more openness about privacy settings • Give control to the consumer regarding how and with whom they can share information
Stream 4: Social media as a CRM and value cocreation platform	Social CRM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate social media with CRM platforms to exploit the full potential of social media platforms • Allow the use of social media data in the relational information process • Foster social media information sharing at both intra- and inter-organizational level • Enhance social CRM capabilities to better serve the needs of social media users

(Continues)

TABLE 6 (Continued)

Research stream	Topics	Managerial lessons extracted
	Customer engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalize social media engagement practices to increase positive customer experiences • Enable real-time interactions to increase customer emotional attachment toward the brand • Engage customers through different forms of initiatives, such as gamification and social tags • Promote experiential marketing (e.g., branded events) to recruit customers as brand ambassadors
	Value cocreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate social interactions (e.g., sharing information between customers) for branding cocreation • Develop a social media community to encourage crowdsourcing and value creation • Unlock customer feedback and collaboration behaviors on the brand's social media page • Invite opinion leaders in social media to involve in the product/service design process
Stream 5: Social media as a general strategic tool	Social media adoption and implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop organizational competence and commitment toward the strategic use of social media • Select/employ managers with adequate knowledge and expertise in social media • Provide necessary training for employees to use social media professionally for business purposes • Invest in resources and capabilities to develop sound social media marketing strategies
	Social media strategies and effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop clear strategic goals and orientation toward social media management • Integrate social media strategy into firm's overall marketing and business strategy • Encourage robust collaboration between departments to support social media strategy • Create appropriate performance metrics to evaluate the success of social media strategy

Abbreviations: AR, augmented reality; CRM, customer relationship management; CSR, corporate social responsibility; UGC, user-generated content; WOM, word-of-mouth.

for hedonic brands the use of fun and novelty language may be more appropriate (Davis et al., 2019). Importantly, brand posts with inspirational knowledge and trending topics can add more value to customers following brand social media pages. Marketers should also ensure that branded content needs not only to be carefully designed, but also to be cleverly disseminated to generate content virality. It is therefore important to identify key influencers who will effectively diffuse the message through their social media networks and create positive eWOM.

Our review highlighted the critical role of social monitoring capabilities in real-time information acquisition, analysis, and responsiveness to customer needs, which underlines the firm's need to adopt specialized social information processes and/or social responding systems. This will allow for better exploiting information collected from social media, deriving valuable insights for target marketing, and detecting market changes ahead of competitors. The development of a sound social monitoring strategy, accompanied by a clear plan for responding to customer complaints, firestorm warning systems, and social information processes, is therefore of paramount importance. However, such strategy needs to be aligned

with specific workable actions, such as establishing a clear social media presence, developing a consistent communication style, and increasing response effectiveness (Johnen & Schnittka, 2019). It is also vital to adopt modern predictive analytical techniques (e.g., machine learning) that would facilitate having more sound marketing decision-making procedures.

Marketers need also to integrate social media with their CRM platforms, allowing the use of social media data to segment the market, understand characteristics/preferences of target groups, customize market offerings, and engage key customers. However, the effectiveness of social CRM is determined not only by the firm's investment in social media, but also by the level of customer engagement. This highlights the importance of personalized social media engagement practices to target customers with the purpose of building long-lasting relationships. Central to customer engagement is the necessity to create customers' emotional connections with the firm's social media brand (Dwivedi et al., 2019). In fact, different forms of social media tools (e.g., vlogs or podcasts) that enable real-time interactions between the firm and its customers can be adopted to strengthen emotional attachment and value creation.

Finally, our review highlighted insufficient leadership, knowledge shortage, and lack of employee motivation as inhibiting the use of social media as a marketing tool, which stresses the need to think strategically in developing social media marketing competence and commitment within the firm. In doing so, it is important to select and employ people with knowledge and expertise in social media, as well as provide the necessary training for employees to acquire relevant knowledge and make efficient use of social media. This will ensure that all employees will share a common frame of reference in properly analyzing posted information and interactions on social media and taking the right measures to effectively exploit them. Importantly, strategic social media engagement orientation should not only have a focus on customers but also on employees, as the latter may be in a better position to understand customer needs and respond accordingly (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Managers need also to carefully integrate their social media marketing strategies into the firm's overall marketing strategy, as well as allocate sufficient resources and cultivate an organizational culture that would facilitate the acquisition of new social media practices and processes.

9 | CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This review study has broadened and deepened our understanding of the social media marketing phenomenon by providing a systematic review of major research streams during the period 2009–2021 (see Figure 3 for a summary of the key findings regarding each stream). One summary conclusion that can be derived from the analysis pursued is that this field of research is continuously evolving to keep pace with the rapid developments taking place within the context of social media. It is also evident that the body of knowledge developed

has not yet reached maturity and that there is still a long way to go before it becomes a real independent discipline. We believe that the field is still underexplored, with many unresolved issues requiring further investigation, while greater attention needs to be paid to theoretical advancement, methodological rigor, and thematic development. Despite these problems, the knowledge accumulated in this line of research until now underlines the strategic importance of social media as a tool to identify, maintain, and grow customers in an environment characterized by increasing globalization, intensifying competition, and accelerating digitalization.

Our study makes three key contributions to the marketing field. First, it takes a critical step in disentangling how social media are reshaping the marketing environment and how firms, customers, and social media intertwine in the various marketing processes. By exploring the impact of social media on different marketing functions and identifying their different roles, we provide important insights into social media marketing strategies. We also provide a rich inventory of knowledge of theoretical, methodological, and thematic issues of social media marketing research that could serve as a platform to inspire scholars in the field to find fruitful opportunities for further research.

Second, building on the value creation perspective, and taking into consideration the two constituent parts of social media marketing (i.e., social media and marketing), we propose an organizing framework that comprises five distinct research streams. These streams were determined based on the different key roles played by social media and the values that firms can capture from social media. This categorization has proved useful in effectively guiding, organizing, and systematically analyzing the disjointed nature of the social media marketing literature, as well as facilitated the identification of areas for further convergence, consolidation, and refinement. In particular, our review has helped to enrich understanding of



FIGURE 3 Key findings for each stream of social media marketing research.

strategically using social media to create value with an enlarged number of actors and a broader range of activities involved.

Third, although practice development has progressed more intensively compared to theoretical advancement in the social media marketing area, this review offers useful managerial insights and provides guidance of how these can be effectively and efficiently accommodated. These can assist practitioners to design and implement sound social media marketing strategies in a fast-changing environment fueled by rapid technological developments. By explaining the various roles played by social media in supporting different marketing functions, and considering the different values accrued from them, social media marketing managers would be in a better position to successfully exploit business opportunities.

The findings and contributions of this study should be seen within the context of certain limitations. First, to ensure the quality of our review, we restricted our analysis to articles published in academic journals incorporated in the UK-based ABS list, although it is understood that there are social media marketing studies in lower level journals and in other publication outlets, such as conference proceedings. Moreover, our review focused on studies conducted within the marketing discipline, although social media research also covers useful issues pertaining to other business (e.g., management) or non-business (e.g., information technology) areas. Furthermore, although our study proposes a framework through the value creation lens, there can be other possible ways to organize the fragmented social media marketing literature using different theoretical lenses or perspectives.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Fangfang Li  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4883-1730>

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APPENDIX 1: JOURNAL ARTICLE CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING RESEARCH

Journal	Total (n = 418) %	Time period			
		2009–2011 (n ₁ = 9) %	2012–2014 (n ₂ = 45) %	2015–2017 (n ₃ = 125) %	2018–2021 (n ₄ = 239) %
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	19.9	–	2.2	11.2	28.5
<i>Journal of Interactive Marketing</i>	10.8	11.1	11.1	8.8	11.7
<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	8.4	11.1	2.2	12.8	7.1
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	8.1	44.4	15.6	4.8	7.1
<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>	4.8	11.1	8.9	8.0	2.1
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	4.8	–	4.4	0.8	7.1
<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i>	4.1	–	4.4	5.6	3.3
<i>Psychology & Marketing</i>	4.1	–	–	6.4	3.8
<i>Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing</i>	3.6	–	6.7	2.4	3.8
<i>International Journal of Research in Marketing</i>	3.1	–	2.1	5.6	2.1
<i>Computers in Human Behavior</i>	2.9	–	–	5.6	2.1
<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	2.9	–	2.2	2.4	3.3
<i>Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing</i>	2.4	–	–	4.8	1.7
<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	1.7	–	2.2	–	2.5
<i>Marketing Science</i>	1.4	11.1	6.7	0.8	0.4
<i>Decision Support Systems</i>	1.0	–	2.2	2.4	0.4
<i>Information Systems Research</i>	1.0	–	2.2	0.8	0.8
<i>Journal of Services Marketing</i>	1.0	–	–	2.4	0.4
Other	14.0	11.2	26.9	14.4	11.8