What makes firms great at digital marketing?

A qualitative analysis of firms' digital marketing capabilities.

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Abstract

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Digital marketing is a well-researched field and a rapidly transforming function that requires continuous adaption from employees. Extant work on digital marketing identified that new technologies and digitalization are valuable and enable firms to improve their processes to become more efficient. However, previous research focused solely on specific aspects separately, without addressing the lack of a holistic understanding of digital marketing effectiveness, and how to link capabilities, strategy, and practice. To address this gap, I examine how and why firms can be successful at digital marketing at the organizational level. I answer this question by using a qualitative approach, where I collected a combination of archival and interview data with digital marketing experts and executives. My analysis highlights how a culture of optimization, based on six key values, facilitates the integration of digital marketing capabilities into daily processes such as iterative strategizing that adaptable employees, that are responsible learners, can exploit to contribute to digital marketing excellence. This study has several theoretical and managerial implications, which are discussed in turn.

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Introduction:

Digital marketing—the use of digital or social channels to promote a brand or reach consumers, which can be executed on the internet, social media, search engines, mobile devices, and other channels—has become increasingly important today (AMA, 2023; Herhausen *et al.*, 2020; Hofacker *et al.*, 2020). Researchers have devoted important efforts to inform independent aspects of digital marketing, a complementary sphere to traditional marketing. For instance, social media marketing and digital marketing communications have been granted a lot of interest throughout the years (Leung *et al.*, 2013; Wang, 2020), and work has identified various social media strategies and tactics to improve consumer relationships, digital awareness, advertising, and thus marketing performance (Jobs *et al.*, 2015; Leung *et al.*, 2015; Pandey *et al.*, 2020). Another well-researched area of digital marketing is search engines, where search engine marketing and search engine optimization have been shown to be key drivers of digital marketing success (Gudivada *et al.*, 2015; Sharma *et al.*, 2019; Singh *et al.*, 2022). Yet another field where extensive research has been conducted is e-commerce marketing, and work found avenues supporting revenue generation (Hoque *et al.*, 1999; Sismeiro & Bucklin, 2004; Kassemeier *et al.,* 2023; Saura *et al.*, 2019; Kremez *et al.*, 2021). Research that has independently examined these specific areas of digital marketing is important, as it provides insights into some of the factors that can improve digital marketing effectiveness.

Yet, an important gap in prior work is that these factors have been examined only in isolation. Although we know that big data usage and data analytics, digital marketing resources and capabilities, and optimization may increase digital marketing performance (Chaffey & Patron, 2012; Hair & Sarstedt, 2021; Yasmin *et al.*, 2015), less is known about how firms can best leverage

these specific areas together as part of a broader organizational strategy. Therefore, there is a need to focus on the holistic understanding of digital marketing efficiency, as current literature has fallen short in explaining how organizations can orchestrate these different aspects of digital marketing effectively.

To address this gap, I examine how and why firms can be successful at digital marketing at the organizational level. I answer this question by using a qualitative approach, where I collected a combination of archival and interview data with digital marketing experts and executives.

My analysis reveals that successful firms embrace a specific organizational culture that I term a 'culture of optimization.' I characterize a culture of optimization as comprising six key values and describe how it allows organizations to take advantage of data and technology, embrace the constant change surrounding digital marketing, and increase overall digital marketing efficiency by optimizing tactics and strategies. More specifically, I find that organizational culture is closely tied to a type of strategic approach that I term iterative strategizing and specific qualities in employees.

This study has several theoretical and managerial implications. From a conceptual point of view, I identify that a culture of optimization is an important organizing element for digital marketing success. I then propose that it may be the next instantiation of market orientation (Gebhardt *et al*., 2006; Kumar *et al*., 2011), more contemporary and adapted to the digital era. Additionally, this research provides several insights for managers, including the empowerment of employees that are responsible learners and a set of guidelines to avoid marketing myopia (Levitt, 2008) when focusing on optimization. Next, I review the literature on digital marketing to better situate my study.

Trends in Digital Marketing Research

In this section, I review existing research about digital marketing, identifying and describing the main aspects important to this research. I show that digital marketing is a well-researched field and research has been conducted on most aspects important to digital marketing. Yet, my review finds that prior work has concentrated on isolated aspects of digital marketing and has not provided theoretical and strategic insights that can inform how to integrate all aspects of digital marketing organizationally. I exemplify this gap in the next paragraphs by examining three key aspects of digital marketing: big data, digital marketing resources and capabilities, and optimization.

Data-driven marketing and big data

The digitalization of consumer lives has made it possible for firms to collect an increasingly important amount of data on their activity. Organizations are now evolving in an ecosystem that has become more and more data-driven, fueling the need to use data-driven strategies to gain a competitive advantage (Cutrona *et al*., 2019). Firms that have a solid understanding of their key performance indicators and use data to optimize their campaigns have a better chance of achieving their goals (Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Saura, 2021). Perhaps the most substantial driver of the changes enabled by digital marketing is the emergence of big data and the analytical methods used to examine and understand the data (Hair *et al*., 2018), as researchers firmly established mastering data analytics as a competitive advantage. Prior work shows the importance of big data and how to leverage it independently of other aspects of digital marketing (Chaffey & Patron, 2012; Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Miklosik & Evans, 2020). For example, research identified the use of web analytics in improving online marketing through big data (Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

Additionally, prior work highlights the potential of web analytics for companies with complex selling processes (Miklosik & Evans, 2020). Nonetheless, no prior research examined the organizational integration of big data with other aspects of the firm. Although we are aware that the use of big data and data analytics is key to digital marketing success, less is known about how to exploit these particular areas most effectively as part of a larger organizational strategy.

Digital marketing resources and capabilities

Resources, capabilities, and firm performance are widely researched constructs in and outside the digital marketing literature. Resources are productive assets the firm owns, whereas capabilities are what the firm can do (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). Organizational capabilities can be defined as "firms' capacity to deploy resources for the desired end result" (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011).

Recently, focus has been put on digital marketing capabilities (Herhausen *et al.*, 2020; Tariq *et al*., 2022; Wang, 2020). For example, researchers examined the impact of digital marketing capabilities and concluded that they have to be dynamic and comprehensive to positively impact firm performance within small, medium, and large organizations (Tariq *et al*., 2022; Wang, 2020). Prior research focused on digital marketing capabilities as relational dynamic capabilities showed the moderating effect of entrepreneurial orientation and firm size on the digital marketing capabilities and performance relationship (Bii & Onyango, 2018). However, less research has been conducted on how to link resources, strategy, and practice. In contrast, my work discusses how resources can be exploited organization-wide through a specific type of organizational culture and explain why employees with specific qualities are best to leverage digital marketing resources.

Digital marketing optimization

One of the most researched digital marketing capabilities contributing to marketing performance is optimization, which enables firms to maximize the efficiency of their resources using web analytics and data (Chaffey & Patron, 2012; Wang, 2020). Prior research about optimization refers to it as the creation of the most favorable conditions for obtaining the desired results without excessive use of resources (Kuzmenko *et al.*, 2022). It describes how collecting data and experimenting with various data-driven tactics for understanding and optimizing web usage is the essence of optimization in practice for digital marketing (Chaffey & Patron, 2012). Other key findings include the insight firms that have a solid understanding of their key performance indicators (KPIs) and use data to optimize their campaigns will have a better chance of achieving their goals (Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Saura, 2021).

Yet, existing work only highlights the importance of optimization on its own, stating its importance for better digital marketing efficiency. Prior research is mute about how to integrate optimization at the strategic level to exploit digital marketing most efficiently.

In conclusion, previous literature focused on the emergence of digital marketing, identifying its effectiveness over traditional marketing and thus making it an important and well-researched field (Herhausen *et al.*, 2020). Many aspects of digital marketing and how to leverage them independently were identified, such as big data analytics, digital marketing resources and capabilities, and optimization. Yet, previous research focused solely on these aspects separately. What we lack is an encompassing view of what makes each of these individual elements work together organizationally. As a result, there is a need to focus on the lack of a holistic understanding of digital marketing effectiveness. I now turn my attention to the method I used to address this gap.

Methodology

I used qualitative research methods to explore what makes firms effective at digital marketing. My analysis combines archival and interview data. This methodological approach is ideal for my goal of theory generation. I now expand on how I collected and analyzed data.

I started my project by collecting archival data to better situate and understand the phenomenon and develop my expertise in digital marketing. To do so, I retrieved data from the most popular and relevant digital marketing podcasts with successful digital marketers and the best strategies to use, but also from YouTube videos made by successful digital marketers explaining successful strategies and pieces of advice to use regarding new emerging trends in the digital marketing landscape. I chose podcast series based on their reputation, the guests featured, and the podcasts' total number of plays. The same criteria were applied for selecting the YouTube videos. This type of content covered both experts discussing how they approach performing digital marketing, as well as content made for didactic purposes that provided information from a different angle than podcasts displaying a conversation between two digital marketing experts. A total of 52 files were collected. Examples include: Ahead of the Game podcast: "2022 Trends The Shiny New Object podcast", The Digital Marketing Podcast, Agent of the Change, The Search Engine Journal Show, and YouTube videos such as "5 explosive digital strategies for 2023", "Google Ads in 2023", and Neil Patel most popular videos on digital marketing success. I stopped collecting podcasts and videos when adding one more podcast or video did not add much more value to the analysis—or what is referred to as saturation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Podcasts and videos were then transcribed using an artificial intelligence-based transcription service, before being analyzed. As it is a standard procedure in qualitative research, the data analysis was iteratively conducted alongside the data collection (Kozinets *et al.*, 2012), so I coded each podcast or video

before moving on to the next one. That allowed me to refine my analysis, add more meaningful codes, such as website and search engine optimization, and have a clearer idea of the emergent insights as I was progressing.

The goal for collecting archival data was twofold: First, it allowed me to grasp a better overall knowledge of digital marketing successful tactics and strategies, to prepare better and extend my expertise on the core areas of digital marketing before conducting the interviews. Being better prepared and having a broader knowledge of successful digital marketing strategies helped me devise the interview guide and concentrate on areas that podcast data was not covering well, as well as some key topics such as employee value, emerging trends and tools in digital marketing, and optimization. Second, it also allowed me to gather data from a hard-to-access population: some of the world's most successful and popular digital marketers. Data collected from podcasts was particularly relevant to this project too, given that most podcasts discussed the focus of this research: how firms can be successful at digital marketing.

After I reached saturation with archival data, I collected primary data by conducting in-depth interviews with digital marketing experts. Based on the research question, using semi-structured interviews was a more flexible approach than quantitative research, as it allowed me to adapt the interview questions and topics and follow up on analytically interesting responses (Jamshed, 2014; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Opdenakker, 2006). Embedded in that strategy is the ability to compare and contrast the answers of participants on various topics centered around digital marketing activities, but also to identify similarities and differences in the phenomena of interest during my data analysis (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Thus, interviews were an ideal data collection source in my context given my research question to understand what makes firms great at digital marketing. Since I had collected archival data prior to the interviews, I used the latter to

complement the information I gathered and analyzed from archival data and extend emergent findings from my analysis.

More specifically, this research centers on business-to-consumer (B2C) companies in the apparel and footwear industry, located in Montreal or elsewhere in Canada, and with at most a thousand employees. Participants were recruited based on their suitability with the research: I focused on digital marketing experience, achievements, and positions developing team leading as well as digital marketing strategy conception and implementation. The interviewees were marketers having both expertise in digital marketing as well as a strategic point of view of the firm. They occupied different positions around digital marketing such as digital marketing director, digital marketing performance analyst, eCommerce director, and chief executive officer (CEO) of a digital marketing agency. I adopted purposeful sampling and selected interviews that could inform success factors for digital marketing. Purposeful sampling was analytically useful and the most effective use of my limited resources (Patton, 2002) which is the essence of this research about digital marketing resources and capabilities. I used LinkedIn to approach participants, designing a personalized private invitation using InMail that stated the purpose of my research and why an interviewee fitted well my goals. My research project was reviewed and approved by an ethics committee, validating the research project, recruitment, and interview processes. Participants were not exposed to any explicit risks associated with my research and were provided an information and consent form explaining all details and highlighting the anonymization, as well as the possibility to withdraw from the study.

In total, I interviewed seven digital marketing experts working in various executive positions in their respective companies. Interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes, an adequate compromise for both parties in terms of length and time consumption (Jamshed, 2014).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and on Zoom, and I recorded all interviews. They were designed using an interview guide but were open-ended and semi-structured. Although interviews were informed by an interview guide, the interviewing process also allowed for follow-up questions that varied between participants. I asked open-ended questions that encouraged participants to talk about their digital marketing experience. Their responses determined the ordering of further follow-up questions (Dearnley, 2005), allowing me to grasp a deeper understanding of the practitioner's point of view about all aspects affecting marketing success, be it positive or negative, and insights about how they cope with the latest trends such as artificial intelligence or algorithm updates. I conducted the first three interviews using the initial interview guide that I drew based on the key themes brought to light by podcasts and YouTube videos. The broad themes and questions I discussed with informants were: (1) strengths and weaknesses in terms of digital marketing activities within the company, (2) key qualities and skills required by employees to be a great digital marketer, (3) planning for current and upcoming challenges of digital marketing, keeping up with new tools and updates, (4) developing successful campaigns over time, and (5) organizational culture supporting the digital marketing success. Table 1 provides more information about the dataset and the use of each type of data:

Table 1: Dataset information and examples

Examples	Data type	Purpose
Podcast: Search Engine Journal Show Ep 250: How to Maximize Your PPC Performance in 2022 with Jeff Ferguson (Baker, 2021)	Archival (secondary)	Understand the topic of digital marketing, provide emergent findings, orient interview guide, collect data from a hard-to-access population; refine emergent findings
YouTube video: 5 Explosive Digital Marketing Strategies for 2023 (BIG Changes Ahead!)	Archival (secondary)	
Interviews (e.g., **digital marketing performance analyst, eCommerce director**)	Interview (primary)	Enrich and expand on emergent findings from archival data

After completing a few interviews, I analyzed each interview transcript and coded them, both relying on the main codes mentioned for the podcasts as well as generating emergent codes. Then, based on my emergent findings, I revised my interview guide, and I was able to focus the discussion during the following interviews on particularly interesting topics discussed with previous interviewees, such as optimization, organizational culture, and reskilling and upskilling for employees, driven by my perceptions on relevant aspects of digital marketing success. I analyzed and coded those redesigned interviews after completing them. It also affected my analysis as I focused on fewer but more important codes at the strategic level, such as optimization resources and capabilities, the evolution of digital marketing in the fast-paced environment, and what makes firms successful.

The data was thus coded using both top-down and bottom-up approaches, inductively generating codes based on the dataset while using concepts related to digital marketing to inform the coding (Dolbec *et al*., 2021). The data analysis began with a first-order analysis. I created codes by seeking similarities and differences among the dataset, with little attempt to distill categories resulting in a large number of categories on the front end of the study (Gioia *et al*., 2012). First-

order codes were generated using terms such as "key resources for firms", "data privacy concerns", "what makes organizations successful", or "profile of a great marketer/employee". I then combined first-order codes into second-order themes, bringing descriptive codes to theory by generating a workable set of themes and concepts. I then distilled the emergent second-order themes even further into second-order ''aggregate dimensions'', helping me describe and make sense of the observed phenomena which is ultimately digital marketing success. I then made sense of their aggregate dimensions, which constitute the major general capabilities identified in the findings for firms to adopt to perform better at digital marketing. Using such data analysis mainly allows any reader to more easily discern how I progressed from raw data to emergent theory in a fashion that is credible and defensible (Gioia *et al.,* 2012).

Overall, this archival and primary data collection allowed me to retrieve and identify key insights on digital marketing success, derived from the qualitative analysis I conducted. I next present the findings.

Findings

My findings describe organizational-level factors that contribute to digital marketing effectiveness. First, I explain how the environment surrounding digital marketing creates new requirements for organizations, as digital marketing is a constantly evolving field, with frequent technological innovation (Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023; Faruk *et al.*, 2021). Then, I theorize what is a culture of optimization. I then moved to explain how a culture of optimization informs a specific strategic approach: iterative strategizing and implementation, which operates by setting a basic strategic plan based on data from previous successful campaigns, then analyzing the results and being ready to react quickly when those results are not satisfactory or sudden changes and trends in the environment emerge. Last, I discuss how the successful exploitation of iterative strategizing and implementation is facilitated by employees who are adaptable, able to reskill and upskill constantly, and are responsible learners. Figure 1 shows the relationship between these three core components of a successful digital marketing organization.

Figure 1. Findings Summary.

Culture of optimization

Iterative strategizing

Adaptable and self-learning employees
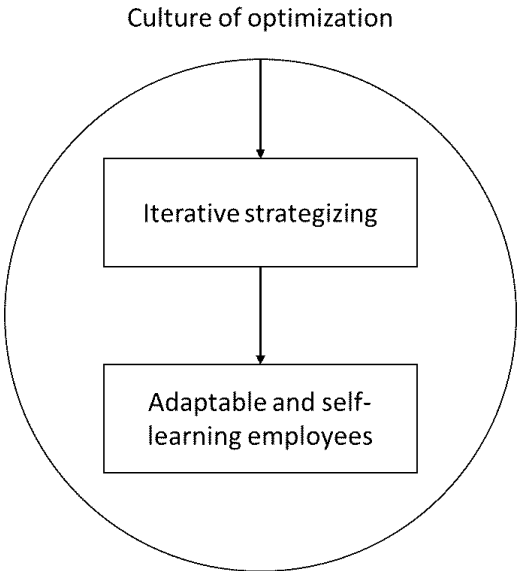
Miklosik & Evans (2020) define marketing as a dynamic and ever-changing business function. New digital technologies, emerging platforms, and online trends are continually appearing in the digital marketing landscape (Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023; Faruk *et al*., 2021; Kuazaqui & Lisboa, 2019; Kotler *et al*., 2020). Today's increasingly digital environment has revolutionized how businesses operate and led to a fundamental shift with regard to how companies conduct digital marketing activities, as recent improvements in technology, such as big data, have impacted every area of digital marketing (Langan *et al*., 2019). Thus, marketing is undergoing a revolution that sees it entering a new era (Budíková, 2014; Spilotro, 2016). Wes McDowell, a web consultant, and strategist, exemplifies this constant change in his podcast: "It's 2023. And the way you market your business this year is going to be really different from how you've done it in the past, there are so many new opportunities that just hit the scene" (McDowell, 2022). Or perhaps put more succinctly by interviewee Louis, marketing development director for a retail international company: "Everything changes all the time [with digital marketing campaigns]." The constant renewal of digital marketers' expertise demanded by the rapidly changing environments demands a high capacity for organizational adaptation.

Creating a culture of optimization

To take advantage of this specific environment and better exploit digital marketing capabilities, my analysis reveals that successful firms create a culture of optimization. By culture of optimization, I mean a specific organizational culture relying on six key values. A culture of optimization enables firms to take advantage of data and technology, embrace the constant change surrounding digital marketing, and increase overall efficiency by optimizing daily digital marketing endeavors.

Like market orientation, an organizational culture of optimization rests fundamentally on cultural values (e.g., Gebhardt *et al.*, 2006). Cultural values can be defined as a system of common values shared by different individuals with various backgrounds and working at different positions within the firm (Shahzad *et al.*, 2012). Drawing on Schein's (1985) organizational culture framework, I identify six key cultural values constituting the pillars of a culture of optimization: (1) Trackability, (2) data-ownership, (3) respect for data privacy concerns, (4) experimentation, (5) adaptability, (6) open-mindedness. For each value, I provide the basic underlying assumption and explain the consequent practical goal. Table 2 provides a summary. Moreover, Shahzad *et al.* (2012) identify that culture is linked to a firm's strategy and tactics as an organization's strategy can be significantly influenced by its culture. For instance, in the context of this research, a business that values experimentation might opt for strategies that put emphasis on data-driven marketing. This can later be implemented as tactics by installing A/B testing processes throughout digital marketing campaigns.

Table 2: Summary Table of A Culture Of Optimization

Values	Assumption	Practical digital marketing application example
Trackability	This value places tracking and measuring as its core. To capitalize on the power of digital marketing firms ought to collect data from their online campaigns to make data-driven decisions as the fundamental basis of a culture of optimization.	Setting KPIs for each canal such as ROAS for every paid search advertisement.
Data-ownership	This value is centered on the ownership of the collected data. Firms with a strong culture of optimization have processes to collect primary data to have exclusivity.	Setting up email marketing campaigns to gain customer information without relying on external third parties.
Data privacy concerns	This value is based on respect for customers' concerns over data privacy. Respectful data collection provides additional value for firms, creates a positive feeling about data collection for customers, and makes them adhere to a culture of optimization.	Only collecting necessary data for business purposes, without selling additional data to external entities, and creating personalized content based on customers' preferences.
Experimentation	This value is the essence of a culture of optimization, placing testing and learning from digital marketing endeavors as the core of it, enabling firms to enhance performance and efficiency.	Adopting A/B testing strategies as daily processes to leverage data effectively and improve website optimization
Adaptability	The capacity to adapt and change is at the core of this value, to react quickly and effectively in the ever-changing digital marketing environment to gain an edge over the competition.	Staying on top of new digital marketing trends and algorithm updates of tools on Twitter to be ready to react when a change is happening.
Open-mindedness	This value puts the development of a growth mindset that can only be reached by staying open-minded when optimizing with new tools and technology for digital marketing.	Approaching artificial intelligence-based tools with an open mind to achieve digital marketing tasks more effectively will allow the firm to grow and gain a competitive advantage.

The first value that my analysis identifies is trackability, which refers to a systematic approach to creating campaigns and tactics that can be tracked. It guides the everyday tracking activities that must be implemented into the daily actions of digital marketers involved in organizations adopting a culture of optimization.

Implementing an effective data governance structure to transform that raw data into knowledge and capitalize on big data is an important facet of digital marketing success (Miklosik & Evans, 2020). Prior research has identified the activity of tracking data and digital marketing campaigns as a successful tactic available to marketers, which can be used to monitor the results of marketing endeavors (Bala & Verma, 2018; Eti & Bari, 2020).

However, the norm of trackability differs from the process of tracking as it is culturally embedded within an organization. For example, Interviewee Donna, digital marketing director for a retail brand, discusses how trackability is an inherent part of all marketing activities:

> Tracking and measuring remains something that we [digital marketers] must do throughout the year. I had a small catch-up to do because the former team did not measure all data as it should have been done. We also automated some processes throughout the year to facilitate information gathering, but ultimately this year with me it is much easier because we have a complete history of data and KPIs, cost per session, ROAS, … per month, and campaign. I have been there for more than a year and we now have a complete data history, we can see some trends emerging and can try to envisage what the future could be.

She also adds:

If there is something that we [the firm] are not doing well enough, it really is tracking and measuring, when it is possible to do it at every moment. […] We could accredit the revenue to each of our digital initiatives. I do think it is a strength that others do not have.

Donna highlights the benefits of tracking and measuring data in their daily operations per the firm's value. She clearly states that, by conceptualizing trackability as an inherent part of every digital initiative, the firm had a competitive advantage over its competition. Thus, having a core value of trackability implemented strongly into a firm's culture could lead to better digital marketing success.

Data-ownership

The second value is data ownership. This value guides the organization's actions and behaviors to allow the firm to own data instead of relying on external entities (e.g., market research firms), whenever possible. As trackability enables firms to collect data and leverage the power of optimization, my analysis acknowledges managing culturally big data and its collection as the powerful basis of digital marketing. While data-ownership could be seen as a practice or an activity that a firm could engage in intermittently, digital marketing expert Jeff Ferguson explains how, for successful firms, data-ownership is a way of acting:

First-party data is basically anything that you collect on your own, right, and it's the only thing you collect on your website. And it can take many forms […] you collect a newsletter list for your inhouse, where all the information you collect, at checkout, even other types of information like that, or even broader stuff that you collect on your own as part of doing business […] companies can increase the amount of first-party data that they are sitting on to be able to utilize it to prepare for this change to happen [when talking about the death of

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third-party cookies]. [Successful firms] are starting to use other methodologies, […] do whatever you can on that first party side now, start yesterday, and whatever it is, and whether it is coming up with a newsletter or just telling people to register, start your own cookie pools with a programmatic provider or something along those lines. The data warehouses, there are things you can do to kind of prepare for this. But it is going to be what the future looks like. And that is going to really determine how you can track these people [customers] and how you can talk to them again. […] This is sort of our dependency on first-party tracking and first-party data (Baker, 2021).

As he explained, collecting first-party data is essential to ensure daily actions are conducted with that data-ownership guiding principle in the mind of every successful organization. Such firms follow this value by systematically collecting primary data to have exclusivity over it and therefore control their digital marketing strategy, leading to better digital marketing practices and performance. When adopting that specific value in practice, as Jeff explained, actions allowing firms to collect first-party data can be collecting email addresses to leverage email marketing, implementing surveys, asking for customer feedback and reviews, or using lead generation forms on the company website; therefore, implementing data-ownership as a central value of a culture of optimization for all digital marketing efforts.

Data privacy concerns

The third core value of a culture of optimization is respecting customer privacy. By this value, I refer to systematic ways for firms to design and follow ethical guidelines when designing and conducting digital marketing campaigns. Adopting this value at the essence of every digital marketing strategy allows firms to gain more trust from customers and acceptance of big data

usage. It should be visible and clear in every aspect of digital marketing activities. Both academia and practitioners agreed on the rise of privacy concerns due to big data and data-driven marketing (Jobs *et al.*, 2015), changing consumer behavior as customers are losing trust and becoming much more critical (Bala & Verma, 2018), justifying the need to address this challenge for digital marketers. My analysis exemplifies this new challenge, focusing on how organizational culture can become a way to overcome privacy issues to make them an advantage. Digital marketing privacy expert Punit Bhatia states: "76% of people say privacy investments build customer trust, we all want to build customer trust". Therefore, by respecting consumer data privacy concerns, "there is a business benefit" (Casale & Smith, 2021).

My analysis exemplifies how managing data culturally can benefit firms: "how it's being collected, how it's being stored, how it can be exploited, and used and so on. Of course, there are positive and really good ways of using the data", said digital marketing expert Stephane Hamel. Stephane then continues by exemplifying the consumer reaction toward respectful data management:

> But what is most attractive about that is it focuses the ownership on the individual exactly that I own my data, therefore, I control who can see it, what they can do with it, and how long they can access it. Yeah, as an end consumer, I am the one in control of my data. And I love that because the current assumption in the industry is that everyone else owns your data, and you can't control anything about it (Bailey, 2021).

As a result, he stated the positive outcomes for firms owning but respectfully managing consumer data: "They have their own data, and they can, they can use it. And, you know, I'm a big Amazon customer. And it's a brand that I trust. So, I'm willing to give them a lot of my data. If they make good use of it and serve me better" (Bailey, 2021). Hence, embedding respect for

concerns over privacy around data as a cultural value of the firm can help foster trust from consumers. Managing data privacy can become a key capability to increase digital marketing performance.

Experimentation

The next value is experimentation. By experimentation, I refer to systemically testing and learning in digital marketing activities. Experimentation enables firms to enhance the performance and efficiency of every digital marketing activity. Chaffey & Patron (2012) showed how experimentation initiatives using web analytics and test-and-learn tactics could improve optimization and overall digital marketing performance.

For example, David Finberg, the founder of Peaks Digital Marketing, discusses how experimentation is not something that the firm does once in a while; rather, it is at the core of how digital marketing operates, especially data-driven marketing:

> [experimentation] Is a continual process, something that you just want to be set up for success, like signing up for a Google Optimize account, it's free, make sure you've got Google Analytics, and then let's go through some of your data and say, okay, if we were to strategize around this and use data as a primary indicator of success, what do we know is already working on the website? And how can we replicate more of what's working and make some hypotheses or educated inferences around certain design elements? And then start testing those on the pages that aren't converting as well (Brooks, 2022).

David Finberg exemplifies here the need to merge the optimization process into the daily digital marketing efforts by deeply embedding experimentation as a systematic process, allowing for more efficient online campaigns. For example, as David Finberg said, relying on the value of

experimentation by adopting A/B testing using Google Analytics is an ongoing process that must be visible and relevant for employees daily.

However, if it is not deeply integrated as actions and behaviors guided by the value of experimentation, the power of optimization could decrease considerably. Digital marketing evangelist for Google Avinash Kaushik explains why it is important to embed experimentation as a cultural value of the firm:

It's the leadership, it's, it's asking the right questions, it's the culture in the organization, of being data-driven, and so on, as well. So, I think it's one thing having the data, you've then got to tease out the insights. But then you need the culture in the organization to get this right, and to really allow you to drive things forward. So, this is a really major building block of creating a data-driven organization (Rogers *et al.*, 2022).

As he states in this podcast, by implementing experimentation as a core value of the firm, optimization could become a continual learning entity. Thus, relying on experimentation as a key value is crucial for creating a data-driven organization, reacting quickly, and leveraging successful tactics to increase marketing performance. Of course, having experimentation as a value requires skilled employees able to adapt and react quickly in response to the rapidly-evolving digital marketing landscape. Therefore, the next value is highly valued by successful firms as it is key to a favorable implementation of a culture of optimization through employees.

Adaptability

The penultimate value my analysis identifies is adaptability. Defined as the ability to adapt to new environments or situations, prior research identified adaptability as a key competency for career success (O'Connell *et al.,* 2008). By identifying adaptability as a value, I refer to the

capacity for firms to react quickly and effectively in the ever-changing digital marketing environment to gain an edge over the competition. In short, the capacity to make changes in light of new conditions. In today's rapidly transforming world, adaptability is crucial to achieving digital marketing success as a corporate value. Marketing development director Louis exemplifies the importance of agility in the ever-changing digital marketing environment:

> Everything changes all the time, and you don't know what you're going for [in terms of results] when you launch a campaign. Some things work, some things don't. Maybe you have not reached the right target, or maybe you did reach the right target, but you didn't talk to them the right way didn't show the right product, or you should. You pushed a picture when what's working right now it's video, so you need to have some motion design. So, you need to test, learn and therefore be able to challenge yourself to accept that you know you're not necessarily right the first time. […] And that requires curiosity, openness, and humility.

> She also adds that for firms to adopt agility as a core value of the firm, "You need to interact in a very efficient way and very constructive collaborative way with everybody, at every level of the company. […] To do that, you need adaptability." In this particular context, she explained throughout the interview that adaptability should be visible and reflected in everyday digital marketing activities as an obvious key to success for employees. She discussed how adaptability should be a quality favored and anchored in the firm, in the mind of every digital marketer, rather than a special characteristic of a few special successful employees. It is crucial to install adaptability as a key value of a culture of optimization because it allows employees to adapt and change when a specific tactic is not working. Adaptability allows employees, and by extension organizations, to react quickly and efficiently towards change, acting as a guide towards marketing

excellence. Thus, by having the value of adaptability deeply embedded in the firm's principles, firms could capitalize on this and have better overall digital marketing efficiency. While we have now seen that adaptability is key, the last value of the culture of optimization is related to adaptability and corroborates the fact that having the right values of the culture of optimization leads to better digital marketing practices.

Open-mindedness

The last value of a culture of optimization is open-mindedness. By open-mindedness, I refer to a receptive attitude to a vast array of ideas, perspectives, and information and engage with organizational and environmental changes.

Embedding open-mindedness as a culture value of a culture of optimization can help guide employees toward digital marketing performance. For example, participant Harvey, the CEO of a digital marketing agency, discusses how open-mindedness is important for digital marketing success in the long term. He also explains how embedding an open-minded mindset within the core of the firm is crucial to perform "in this industry where change is a daily fact" (Harvey):

> [Big data] is another big change. Firms have to address technology in a certain favorable way. Often for firms, the IT department is considered a necessary evil. For other firms, however, it is a growth lever. Regarding how you see ITs can have a big impact. Sometimes it can allow you to go twice as fast in your daily operations. Those firms holding a positive view are much better at digital marketing because they are used to working with tech people, and programmers... […]. We are encouraging the type of attitude that my employee has that I was talking to you about. She wants to automate every process within the firm. She analyzes a tedious, monotonous task, and starts thinking about how to optimize it so

that her brain can become more available to focus on other tasks with a larger added value for the firm. So, for me, it is also the same [mindset to develop] with technology. You need to see technology as a big ally. At the moment you can see ChatGPT as something that could steal your job, or rather as something that will help you and make your job much more interesting.

Harvey explains here his way of thinking about the need to be open-minded and the right mindset firms should embrace about technology and data. By clearly encouraging employee attitudes related to the open-mindedness value - through promotions for instance in Harvey's firm – it shows how employees are more likely to increase digital marketing performance in daily activities, even for monotonous tasks. Therefore, by having the open-mindedness value deeply established in the firm's culture of optimization, firms can address technology and data in the right way by every employee, leveraging technology, and capitalize on emerging trends such as artificial intelligence, thus leading to better efficient digital marketing performance.

Overall, my analysis reveals that successful firms can develop a strong culture of optimization relying on six equally important values, that must be an inherent part of all digital marketing activities. It is crucial to acknowledge that those values are a part of who the company is. While data-ownership for instance could be seen as a practice that organizations could engage in intermittently, successful firms characterize all those values as a core belief and a way of acting, guiding daily employee actions and behaviors that lead the firm to better digital marketing efficiency.

Iterative strategizing

Second, my analysis outlines iterative strategizing as a characteristic strategic approach of firms that are successful in their digital marketing initiatives. Organizational strategy can be defined as a high-level roadmap for an organization to achieve its objectives on the long-term, setting the desired direction of firms (Miles *et al.*, 1978; Steensen, 2014). Iterative strategizing begins by setting a basic plan based on data from past initiatives. It is then implemented, and results are evaluated based on digital marketing performance measurement. Finally, firms adapt the strategy based on their analysis. This process is iterative, recursive, and continuous.

Online marketing allows firms to deal with a great quantity of data leading to insights that are reliable and retrievable by digital marketers, and organizations can exploit web analytics and leverage data to benefit from marketing performance measurement (Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015). These data-driven methods support innovative approaches to consumer segmentation and address deeper consumer insights, leading to a smarter and more efficient distribution of marketing resources, more personalized interactions, and the creation of more profound customer experiences (Budíková, 2014; Kotler *et al.*, 2020; Miklosik & Evans, 2020; Niininen, 2021).

By iterative strategizing, I refer to strategic planning that involves continuous feedback using data owned by firms and previously acquired through digital marketing campaigns, and the addition of consequent tactical adjustments throughout campaigns and improvement throughout the planning process. Strategic planning involves a set of planning activities such as setting objectives and goals, developing targets and performance indicators, and allocating resources (Ackoff 1970; Ansoff 1991; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011).

First, iterative strategizing involves creating a plan using previous data and implementing it. My analysis finds that, in contrast to traditional marketing planning, where firms typically will

first conduct market research activity, then plan a marketing campaign, and then implement this campaign (Dibb, 2001; Greenley *et al.*, 2004), iterative strategizing involves creating a basic plan, implementing it, analyzing the results, and then continuously adjusting based on the data obtained. The first step to any new strategy of iterative strategizing is to create a plan which will constitute the pillar of future data-driven adjustments.

Interviewee Rachel, a digital marketing performance analyst for a popular retail Canadian company, reports that iterative strategizing is the key to every new campaign, using previous successes as the ground base for the upcoming tactics. She discusses the approach:

The key [to digital marketing success] is that you have to start planning early. All of that preparation happens way in advance. We are going to start planning in March, basically [for the end-of-the-year rush season composed of Black Friday, Cyber Week, and Christmas time]. We have a menu card with tried-and-true tactics that we used last year, or from the learnings from the year before, or maybe the year before that. You take a lot of your 2022 learnings, asking yourself where did we succeed, and then you try: Okay, we are going to replicate that and ensure that we follow the same standard for this year because it worked. Not necessarily that it will work now, but we're going to use it again as a template because this is our tried-and-true tactic.

As Rachel explains, iterative strategizing starts by planning from previous successful digital marketing campaigns to design upcoming ones. By using past successes, firms replicate successfully prior initiatives, ensuring positive results from launch. For example, marketers can replicate what has been proven to be effective strategies and drive better return on investment by allowing a bigger budget from the start and reaching a wider targeted audience with personalized content without having to pre-test the campaign (Chaffey & Patron, 2012). However, as Rachel

mentions, planning from prior successful campaigns does not ensure success. Campaigns have to be regularly adapted to address the constantly evolving nature of the digital marketing landscape. Still, prior campaigns constitute a good starting point to begin with as it is better than testing a completely new approach from scratch.

In addition, Interviewee Donna, digital marketing director, explained the benefits of iterative strategizing and beginning with a tried successful basic plan as follows:

> I am focusing on Q1: that is where all the planning is conceived for the whole year. So, I need to think at a bigger scale, and I ask myself, what is going to contribute to our success in e-commerce … you have to test tactics for sure, but not in Q3 or Q4, but much earlier to be ready for the Black Friday season, so you can then go with tactics that previously worked.

What Donna is pointing out here is that well-established firms willing to achieve success in their busy season are using past plans that worked out as a starting point to begin a critical specific period for the organization with a plan established before based on successful data from the beginning of the year. Interviewee Rachel concludes:

> So, I think having your campaign setup where everything just links back to the objective is number one. Number two is that all of your campaigns are optimized towards something.

As she states, starting with a basic plan that relates to previously identified objectives and former successes for the firm is central and representative of iterative strategizing. Then, the following course of action of the iterative strategizing process is oriented toward optimization to obtain better efficiency utilizing digital marketing resources.

Optimizing for iterative strategizing starts with analyzing campaign data and ongoing results. Therefore, data analysis plays a central role in iterative strategizing since it will dictate the

resource allocation process of firms (see also Chaffey & Patron, 2012; Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Analysis and tracking, though, require planning to know what to examine. Interviewee Donna, digital marketing director of a large retail company, explains how she performs optimization when it comes to iterative strategizing:

> The first thing that I did when I arrived was to have a deeper look at the numbers, and I asked myself what am I tracking specifically. Then, it was by being capable of analyzing data to the slightest iteration that we were able to know which specific tactic is going to get me the most traffic at the smallest cost. Thanks to that I can now differentiate my tactics in a given channel, but I can also analyze and evaluate the channel as a whole. Sometimes I have the same type of goals and objectives for different channels, for instance, if we do remarketing on Facebook or another channel using programmatic, then I can evaluate them in comparison. So, it really is by measuring and following results over a longer period that I can truly know which one of my channels is going to yield the best traffic for every invested dollar.

As Donna exemplifies, one of the strongest aspects of digital marketing is that it is data-driven, and marketers can therefore analyze such data to optimize results and drive a better conversion rate, or in that case, more traffic for a limited budget. Analyzing real-time results of marketing campaigns proves to be critical in determining resource allocation and attaining efficiency. Donna continues:

> If there is something that [our firm] is not doing well enough, it really is measuring, when it is possible to do it. Technologically speaking. With the pandemic going on, we were more focused on e-commerce, so we did not develop the measuring aspect between online

advertising and store sales. Last year, we were doing that, so we were able to attribute specific revenues to our digital initiatives. I think it is a strength that others do not possess.

What Donna said in this quote highlights the importance of measuring and analyzing results when conducting online campaigns. If executed properly, iterative strategizing is a capability that can give organizations the edge when marketing and selling online. As she mentioned, data analysis is technologically achievable and accessible to most organizations, but not every firm is focusing its efforts and resources on that specific activity, even when marketing performance measurement can lead to many benefits for the organization such as tracking and evaluation, but also benefits in the industry. Overall, web analytics tools provide opportunities for substantial improvements in digital marketing performance (Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

Iterative strategizing also entails reacting to results and changes in consumer needs and desires. My analysis finds that firms should also be ready for emergencies, such as the emergence of new trends, by having different backup scenarios to allow digital marketers to react quickly and adapt to the environment as fast as possible. Interviewee Rachel adds:

> we also have break-glass scenarios. Say every day we have our menu card of tactics that we are doing, having certain strategies in motion, or we are going to have our campaigns optimizing towards certain targets that we see that have been successful. But then say something happens, something unprecedented happens and we are actually not seeing the return. So, we want to get those break glass scenarios, backup scenarios that we have in case of an emergency.

As Rachel exemplifies, even when a previously used and successful tactic is implemented, being ready for emergencies is vital to digital marketing performance in a competitive industry, and requires constant adjustments based on the data collected.

Adapting quickly is key to iterative strategizing, as interviewee Mike, a customer acquisition manager specialized in digital marketing, highlights:

[with digital marketing and online campaigns] I am more able to keep an eye on what I can optimize instantly. If I see it doesn't work, I can change it quickly. While like if it's offline. Well, it's done. It's set. There is nothing you can do, just watch, and witness the results. So, it's more difficult.

Mike outlined one of the key advantages of digital marketing that iterative strategizing can use to maximize efficiency: making data-driven decisions and reacting quickly when analyzing ongoing results. In comparison to traditional marketing where there is no possibility to change the campaign once it has launched, digital marketing provides the opportunity for fine-tuning in reaction to the results and the environment.

In short, my analysis reveals iterative strategizing as a capability used by successful digitally-driven marketing companies to benefit from the data-driven nature of digital marketing. Successful iterative strategizing constitutes setting a basic plan based on data from previous successful campaigns, then analyzing the results, and being ready to react quickly when those results are not satisfactory or sudden changes and trends in the environment emerge. When properly executed, organizations can exploit its potential to allocate and leverage their digital marketing resources more smartly and efficiently. It leads to constant optimization based on ongoing results, which is the essence of a culture of optimization my analysis revealed to be central to successful digital marketing organizations.

The importance of employees

Finally, digital marketing success relies on the expertise of employees. My analysis finds that adopting a culture of optimization and iterative strategizing demands employees who are adaptable and self-responsible learners. This is because the ever-changing digital marketing environment requires constant upskilling and reskilling by employees. Furthermore, organizational culture influences how employees approach problem-solving, collaboration, and decision-making through the tactics used to carry out those strategies. This section expands on the importance of employees to make the most out of a culture of optimization and iterative strategizing.

Find self-responsible learners

Employees are a crucial component of the digital marketing function as they are responsible for executing the strategies and campaigns that drive business growth (Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Tarricone & Luca, 2002) such as performing email marketing, lead generation, or content creation strategies. Hence, a firm's success depends on the skills, expertise, and motivation of its employees. Finding talents with the right skills and knowledge is thus crucial to achieving success (Gabčanová, 2011). Yet, different domains might demand different types of skills and knowledge that might not be leverageable by firms (Cutrona *et al.,* 2019). Therefore, my analysis identifies responding to the ever-changing digital marketing environment by using talents able to harness transformations as a key to success for organizations. Interviewee Louis, the marketing development director for an international retail company, ties having the right employees to taking advantage of opportunities created by the ever-changing landscape of digital marketing:

> It's evolving every day. I mean you don't use TikTok the same way you use Instagram obviously. And you don't do the same on Facebook either. So, you need people who know

the kind of brand content that is relevant to each type of network or platform. And you also need to hire profiles who have the competencies and technical skills to do the right reels, video, images, whatever that's really going to hit it and to be able to create impact as well as engagement.

Louis explains how finding employees with the quality to adapt to change is key since almost every digital marketing tool has its own specificities, allowing firms to take advantage of multiple social media platforms to increase overall brand impact and engagement with customers. Because social media is a way for firms to increase revenue, website traffic, and e-commerce by engaging with customers directly (Pradiptarini, 2011; Durgam, 2018), mastering the right skills adapted to each platform and integrating each platform in the social media strategy to improve customer engagement and loyalty appears to be crucial in digital marketing success.

Employees' responsiveness demands them to possess certain characteristics. It also asks management to continuously improve employees' skills. Ali Newton, the current head of sales for Exposure Ninja and former digital marketing manager for a successful business-to-business company in the United Kingdom, explains that "one of the priorities for businesses is to reskill their staff" (Cameron, 2020). By reskilling, I refer to the process of learning entirely new skill sets that will lead to new career positions requiring new knowledge and skills (Li, 2022; Sivalingam & Mansori, 2020). The concept of reskilling is often associated with the similar concept of upskilling—learning new skills to improve one's current position or job responsibility (Li, 2022; Sivalingam & Mansori, 2020). Despite the distinction, previous literature often combines these concepts, hereafter depicted as "reskilling and upskilling". Upskilling and reskilling current employees allow firms to make the most out of their talents (Li, 2022), and succeeding in a digital-first business requires new skills allowed by reskilling and upskilling (Lewnes, 2021). Daniel

Rowles, the co-founder of the Digital Marketing Podcast, exemplifies this when discussing skills related to digital marketing:

> Unless you are constantly updating your skills, you are actually going backward. Because the World around you is moving so fast, this whole digital transformation, right? How do we create organizations that can operate in this fast-changing environment? We need to focus on skills, as it is one of the answers to that (Rogers *et al.*, 2021).

As Rowles explains, the transforming environment brings constant changes that firms need to exploit to go forward. According to him, upskilling and reskilling their staff is a top priority for firms in response to those changes, and ultimately to take advantage of the opportunities the environment is creating. Being aware of the changes is the first step, then upskilling and reskilling allow firms' employees to be ready to leverage the changes quickly. Those who do not engage in substantive up-skilling or re-skilling through either formal learning or learning through work run the risk of being 'locked into' a particular way of working, that is opposite to performance in digital marketing (Bimrose *et al.*, 2011).

Find adaptable employees

Frequent upskilling and reskilling can be facilitated when employees possess certain characteristics. The first characteristic that my analysis finds is adaptability. At least according to my data, being adaptable is a quality from employees that is often more valued by digital marketing directors than having specific technical knowledge. Take, for example, the following excerpt from interviewee Donna, a digital marketing director for a business-to-consumer retail firm:

> We search for someone eager to learn, and that is extremely uncommon to find data-driven people that have great adaptability and flexibility. That is why, with an equal resume, I

would prioritize this type of person. What I am looking for is personality, not much expertise because it can be gained.

As Donna mentions, adaptability is crucial in her search for employees, so much so that she would privilege this personality characteristic over expertise, which as she mentions "can be gained." It may be that the importance of adaptability for digital marketing directors follows from its centrality as a characteristic necessary for positive responses to many challenges (Johnston, 2018) such as those present in the constantly transforming digital marketing environment.

Echoing this analysis, digital marketing expert Ali Newton also ties the key characteristic of adaptability with the nature of the digital marketing landscape. New tools emerge that support marketing activities. For example, the analysis and processing of data to provide valuable customer insights are revolutionized by AI (Nair *et al*., 2021). Unilever digital marketing growth manager Narsingh Dixit ties the importance of adaptability with new tools to digital marketing effectiveness:

> So, whether that's Unilever, or any other company, for that matter, if you can [adapt to] leverage AI for your company, based on the data that you have, if you own maybe you'll be able to truly unlock that epitome of personalization (Olerton, 2022).

Narsingh Dixit reveals here the power of being adaptable enough to use new trends, aware of the ever-changing environment, and open-minded to multiply digital marketing effectiveness. Indeed, using AI to reach higher levels of personalization means better targeting, fewer costs, and better conversion rates hence better effectiveness (Nair *et al*., 2021). Of course, that would not be possible if employees are not adaptable to engage in reskilling and upskilling processes to learn how to leverage new changes such as AI.

In addition to being adaptable, a second characteristic that my analysis identifies is that employees need to be self-learners and intellectually curious to become responsible for their own learning. Ali Newton exemplifies in his podcast in 2020 the importance of employees willing to learn:

Employees just need a willingness to learn, because things change so quickly, you really have got to keep on gaining knowledge and stay on top of trends … There is a huge digital skills gap for every brand out there, but a lot of people are struggling to find the talent. (Cameron, 2020).

In addition, interviewee Rachel, a digital marketing performance analyst for a renowned apparel company, exemplifies this need to be responsible learners to stay adaptable to new tools or updates:

You have to do your own learning outside of the job to keep being posted and updated about what is happening in the industry. So, I'm doing my own learning. There is a couple of podcasts that I found that I listen to, and they talk about changes in the industry. For example, Tik Tok, is it going to become the next search engine? Things that keep you posted on industry updates. And whatever is happening after, I feel ready.

As these quotes show, a way to achieve flexibility for the employees by themselves is to be personally attentive to industry updates which proves to be a decisive aspect for any good marketer wishing to perform and be prepared for the next digital marketing campaign. That is made possible by having that "willingness to learn" that Ali Newton highlighted. When employees are adaptable enough and become aware of their self-development, they become responsible for their constant upskilling and reskilling.

To sum up, digital marketing is a rapidly transforming function that requires continuous adaption from employees. When recruiting new employees, my analysis shows that digital marketing directors seek people who can easily adapt. Adaptability is important to face the regular changes in the digital marketing environment, as it more easily allows employees to reskill and upskill. Additionally, my analysis shows how firms may prefer employees who are self-responsible for their learning, as this arguably minimizes the managerial efforts required to maintain the value of employees' expertise as employees themselves work on maintaining their skills and knowledge updated.

Discussion

The present study explains how firms can become more effective at digital marketing. My research presents digital marketing as a powerful complement of traditional marketing adapted to the fast-paced environment of the digital age. First, my analysis finds the need for firms to develop a culture of optimization. Based on six key values at the organizational level, a culture of optimization allows firms to take advantage of data and technology, embrace the constant change surrounding digital marketing, and increase overall efficiency by optimizing daily digital marketing endeavors. Next, my analysis identified iterative strategizing as a key capability to implement a culture of optimization into daily processes, where firms start by setting a basic plan based on data collected from past initiatives and implementing it. Then they use performance measurements to evaluate results, before adapting the strategy based on the analysis performed. Finally, my analysis finds that certain employee characteristic facilitates the strategic implementation and the embodiment of a culture of optimization. My analysis proposes that employees that can best implement a culture of optimization and iterative strategizing are those who display qualities of adaptability and self-responsible learning. I explain that this is because digital marketing is rapidly evolving, which leads to employees' frequent upskilling and reskilling.

Extant work on digital marketing identified that new technologies and digitalization are valuable and enable firms to improve their processes to become more efficient (Kassemeier *et al.,* 2023; Wang, 2020). Acknowledging digital marketing's importance due to its complementarity to traditional marketing, new challenges have emerged for organizations with a growing number of technologies and digital marketing tools, calling for better resource allocation and the use of digital marketing capabilities. My analysis extends these findings by identifying a central organizational culture as well as a key strategic approach for firms and managers and how to exploit them to

improve digital marketing performance and efficiency. It contributes to the literature on digital marketing capabilities and performance in the age of digital technologies. In contrast to prior work that privileged the study of individual elements comprising digital marketing, my analysis highlights how a culture of optimization facilitates the integration of digital marketing capabilities into daily processes that adaptable employees that are responsible learners can exploit to contribute to marketing excellence.

When pursuing adaptability in the context of digital transformation, It is essential for businesses not to do it mindlessly but in line with strategy. Indeed, simply adhering to current digital trends, such as establishing a presence on every new social media network, can backfire if it conflicts with the company's strategic goals. For instance, a brand's focus and resources may be spread too thin if it joins a new social media platform like BeReal without considering the platform's potential for business opportunities. Instead, businesses should approach adaptability with a firm grasp of their strategic objectives and distinctive value proposition. Digital trends should be intentionally incorporated, guided by how well they align with the organization's core values and long-term goals. Through this approach, businesses can take advantage of adaptability while retaining the legitimacy and focus of their digital initiatives. This strategy not only ensures a more effective and long-lasting digital transformation but also protects the company from the dangers of mindless adherence to passing trends.

This yields implications both at the theoretical and managerial levels, which I discuss next.

Theoretical implications

One of my main theoretical insights ties to market orientation, marketing's defining strategic orientation (Gebhardt *et al*. 2006; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Kohli and Jaworski (1990) recognized market orientation as "the organization-wide generation of market intelligence, dissemination of its intelligence across departments, and organization-wide responsiveness to it". Market orientation is a cultural orientation that prioritizes both identifying consumer needs and desires and monitoring competitors' activities, and developing resources that can respond to opportunities and threats (Kohli *et al*., 1990; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Widely recognized as the principal cultural foundation of learning organizations (Kumar *et al.*, 2011), market-oriented firms are expected to produce higher profits through superior quality, which, in turn, leads to higher productivity and stronger customer loyalty (Aimin, 2015). Indeed, a superior understanding of customer needs, competitive actions, and market trends enable a market-oriented firm to identify and develop capabilities that are necessary for long-term performance (Day 1994).

Prior research indicates that market orientation has a positive effect on business performance in both the short and the long run (Kumar *et al.*, 2011). However, market orientation has had a diminishing effect on firm performance over time. As market orientation provides a competitive advantage as long as it is a rare and hard-to-imitate resource in the market (Barney 1991; Kumar *et al.*, 2011), its widespread adoption has led to a loss of effectiveness over time, and a lack of positive effect on marketing and business performance. Kumar *et al.* (2011) suggest that firms can increase their level of market orientation in response to competition or later adopters of market orientation, which may help a firm sustain its competitive advantage. I complement this perspective and suggest that market orientation may be adapted to best align with the digital turn.

Academics called for studying the advantages and disadvantages of technological innovation on performance under varying conditions, and the resources that would enable organizations to improve their competitiveness (Kumar *et al.*, 2011). I propose a culture of optimization as an extension of market orientation, to adapt to the digital era.

Similar to Gebhardt *et al.* (2006)'s work, my analysis shows that a culture of optimization rests fundamentally on cultural values. The core values of a culture of optimization have a strong linkage with those of market orientation as previously identified by Gebhardt *et al*. (2006).

Specifically, a core value of market-oriented organizations is trust. This value, shared throughout the organization only, places commitment as the same goal for each employee, generating trust among coworkers (Gebhardt *et al.,* 2006). However, in a new technological era characterized by companies' ownership of customer data, I suggest that trust now expands beyond the boundaries of the firm. Adopting the need to respect privacy concerns as a core organizational, firms may facilitate customer relationships as well as the gathering of valuable customer data on which effective strategies rely. Research has shown that marketing strategies minimizing security risks positively impact consumer trust and therefore the intention to purchase, especially with online marketing (Pappas, 2016). Then, Chibba and Cavoukian (2015) focused on the link between consumer trust and big data privacy and identified that as long as privacy is respected and maintained, trust can be preserved.

A second value of market-oriented firms is openness—the capacity to honestly share information, assumptions, and motives with other employees (Gebhardt *et al.,* 2006). Openness allows employees or stakeholders to understand each other and effectively collaborate together. This value has a strong linkage with the open-mindedness value of a culture of optimization. Within a culture of optimization, open-mindedness is however different as it favors receptiveness

to change and adaptation to new tools and technology for digital marketing. Notwithstanding, the open-mindedness value allows for capitalizing on transformations associated with digital. Thus, by adopting open-mindedness as the new openness value, firms could leverage fully the ever-changing environment associated with digital marketing.

Finally, this study proposes a culture of optimization as the next instantiation of market orientation by extending the initial value from Gebhardt *et al.* (2006) of market as the raison d'être towards experimentation as the raison d'être. Gebhardt *et al.* (2006) defined market as a raison d'être by stating that employees come together as an organization to serve the market and make a living, and that every decision and action must consider how it affects the market. I complement this value by suggesting that to adapt to the digital era, organizations must also integrate experimentation into the value of the market as a raison d'être. Experimentation is the essence of a culture of optimization and its key strategic implementation, iterative strategizing.

Overall, I found new values shared by firms successful at digital marketing that were not part of Gebhardt *et al.* (2006)'s work. These new values complements those grounding a market orientation and are more adapted to digital marketing, making a culture of optimization a contemporary extension of market orientation that integrates digitalization and data-driven marketing.

Also, as a culture of optimization is bringing in a new set of values that links well with the original ones of Gebhardt *et al.* (2006)'s research, but are yet different, it allows to rethink the concept of market orientation for the digital era, with new values much more suited to leverage new technologies and tools. Overall, it makes it more adapted to digital marketing and more complete to allow firms to capitalize on the digital marketing landscape more efficiently,

reaffirming the initial advantage of the concept: improving business performance by gaining a competitive advantage (Kumar *et al.*, 2011; Aimin, 2015).

Managerial implications

This study also provides useful implications for managers and digital marketing practitioners. I discuss how privileging the hiring of adaptable and self-learning employees may bring about challenges to retaining them, and how adopting a culture of optimization may foster marketing myopia. For each, I offer potential avenues to address these challenges.

Retaining adaptable and self-learning employees

First and foremost, it is important to consider the role of employees in digital marketing efficiency, even in the age of digital technologies where AI, automation, and machine learning have changed how firms conduct digital marketing activities (Ištvanić *et al*., 2017; Miklosik & Evans, 2020; Saura *et al.,* 2017). My analysis suggests that marketing managers should aim to hire employees highly adaptable, with the will and abilities to upskill and reskill, and who are responsible learners. However, the latter trait could come with its own set of challenges for managers. Indeed, responsible learners favoring their professional development would be much more mobile, given their constantly updated skillset that would be seen as an asset by many organizations (Capelli, 2000; Veloso *et al.,* 2014). For instance, having an employee highly skilled in the latest emerging social media could see one being an important resource for any company willing to capitalize on such social media tactics. Responsible-learning employees might thus be more difficult to retain in the long or medium term unless managers are aware of those challenges and are proactive to retain them. I suggest two ways companies can do so.

Firstly, that could be done by rightly empowering responsible learners while favoring their awareness. Indeed, by making sure employees are developing themselves in alignment with the firm's objectives and true to responsible-learning employees' abilities and aspirations, they may be stimulated by the possibility of a future in the firm. In practice, that could be achieved by creating personalized professional development programs, where each employee could develop the skills they choose in alignment with their area of expertise, search engine marketing, or social media advertising for example. Moreover, this could very well lead to growth opportunities within the organization as such employees would gain both expertise and experience.

Secondly, another way to retain employees may be to foster a positive and inclusive work environment and organizational culture where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated. Cultivating the right culture can align employees' expectations with the goals of the firm, as realistic expectations result in improved employee retention (Brannick, 2001). Additionally, managers have to accept the new reality that the market will ultimately determine the movement of the employees, not the firm itself (Cappelli, 2000). Therefore, by adopting a culture of optimization allowing firms to be more market-oriented, managers could retain this rare type of employees. Thus, firms could ensure to align well with the current digital marketing environment and rejoin employees' expectations, allowing them to grow and make the most of those talents to improve digital marketing performance. In practice, managers could achieve that by encouraging teamwork, collaboration, and open communication. It will create a culture that encourages work-life balance, employee well-being, and a sense of belonging while recognizing and rewarding excellent accomplishments (Bhattacharya *et al*., 2005; Brannick, 2001; Veloso et *al*., 2014).

Avoiding marketing myopia

In addition to employees, another managerial implication of this research focuses on optimization. While I suggest that optimization culturally serves as the bedrock of digital marketing effectiveness, it may also be that optimization could contribute to marketing myopia (Levitt, 2008). I propose that optimization may do so when managers are too focused on daily tactical implementation and response to optimization at the expense of mid-to-long-term strategizing.

Described as the most influential marketing idea of the past half century, marketing myopia refers to a firm's short-sightedness or narrowness when defining its business, leading to a limited understanding of growth opportunities (Douglas, 1986). It implies that firms will perform better in the long run if they focus on enhancing the utility of a good or service rather than merely attempting to sell their products (Levitt, 2008).

Optimization could lead to a limited strategic scope for companies. For instance, only focusing on daily optimizing tactics could lead to sacrificing long-term strategy-making. In this contemporary instantiation, the larger strategic picture might not be prioritized enough due to too strong of a focus on optimizing the present tasks, without long-term planning. Indeed, overemphasis on daily optimization tactics may restrict the strategic scope of companies, as managers risk losing sight of the broader strategic perspective. This approach fails to address the evolving needs of customers and may lead to business goals no longer being in accordance with customers' needs. Consequently, it can result in a contemporary form of marketing myopia.

To mitigate this issue, digital marketing practitioners could integrate long-term thinking into optimization processes. Embedding the value of open-mindedness, inherent to a culture of optimization, throughout all optimization activities is crucial. Such integration into the firm's culture can guide managers to incorporate long-term strategizing while addressing current

customer needs to foster continuous growth. Thus, some aspects of a culture of optimization can compensate for a too-narrow focus on daily optimization efforts.

Another successful way for managers to address the reasons for marketing myopia and prevent its creation is to recruit marketing people adaptable enough to apply unique solutions to problems that would cause myopia. Building on prior work by Douglas (1986) and Richard *et al.* (1993), managers should look for such employees as they can bring new perspectives and solutions to problems, by being adaptable enough to change the current strategies and problems causing myopia. In practice, that could be achieved by adopting at the cultural level the adaptability value of a culture of optimization, and by actively looking for adaptable, responsible learners able to reskill and upskill, as my analysis highlighted.

Limitations and further research

While my findings provide valuable insights into the digital marketing literature, this study has some limitations. I first present methodological limitations and then other limitations related to the study itself.

This research uses interviews. Qualitative research using interviews has some limitations. The first one is generalizability, as it might be difficult to generalize results from semi-structured interviews to a larger population. The small sample sizes constrain the generalizability of the results (Ochieng, 2009). Making broad generalizations is made more difficult because the distinctive traits and viewpoints of the seven interviewees could not accurately represent the greater community. However, the goal of qualitative research is transferability rather than generalizability (Fischer & Guzel, 2023); it is the goal of quantitative research to reach generalizable findings, which further research could explore.

Another limitation of the methodology used includes the potential for bias or subjectivity in the interpretation of data (Ochieng, 2009). Open-ended questions offer in-depth, comprehensive data, but it also includes subjectivity and possible bias. The interpretation and analysis of qualitative data are influenced by the researcher's perspective and personal biases, as well as the participants' biases or limited self-awareness. In the context of this research, response bias can also occur when participants give answers, they believe to be part of their organizations while it is not systematically the case, especially for successful digital marketing practices.

A way I addressed those methodological limitations was by triangulating my findings. Indeed, triangulation was ensured by researching and retrieving multiple types of data. By combining data sources and triangulating with podcast data, I increased both the credibility and

validity of the findings while reducing the fundamental biases mentioned above (Thurmond, 2001). I will now turn to the limitations of the research itself.

I define digital marketing with reference to promotional activities in the digital sphere. However, marketing encompasses a broader range of activities than just promotion. Other crucial aspects of marketing, like product development, distribution plans, and pricing models, could be the subject of future research and exploration in the field. This broader viewpoint would contribute to a more thorough understanding of marketing as a whole and offer insightful information for companies looking to succeed in the fast-paced environment of the digital age.

This study adopted mainly a point of view from the firm's perspective, due to the chosen sample. Therefore, a limitation would acknowledge a lack of a customer point of view. Further research could investigate how firms' digital marketing capabilities under a culture of optimization align with customer expectations and preferences in the digital era. Understanding the role of optimization, personalization, user experience, customer journey, and data-driven decision-making can provide valuable insights into effective digital marketing strategies.

Also, implementing a culture of optimization can be a long-term and continuous process. Therefore, it can be hard to implement for every organization, especially for firms with a strong organizational culture where its values are not specifically aligned with the ones of a culture of optimization. Thus, further research could explore more in detail the type of industries or companies most favorable to take advantage of a culture of optimization, and whether and how speed of adoption plays a role in the development of a competitive advantage. A greater number of interviews with different experts from several business-to-consumer and business-to-business industries would help to grasp a better overall understanding of the findings.

Finally, the concept of culture of optimization opens novel research avenues. The literature about how to organizationally and culturally integrate best digital marketing practices is still limited, and multiple areas related to a culture of optimization can be explored in the future. For instance, further studies could explore how firms measure the effectiveness of their digital marketing efforts while adopting a culture of optimization, iterative strategizing, and having the right employees, as well as the metrics they employ. It would allow to identify appropriate performance indicators and develop frameworks to assess the impact of digital marketing capabilities on firms' marketing performance with a quantitative approach.

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Appendix C: Ethics certificate

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CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Arthur Lachieze-Rey

Department: John Molson School of Business\Marketing

Agency: N/A

Title of Project: A qualitative analysis of firm's digital marketing resources

Certification Number: 30016883

Valid From: September 08, 2022   To: September 07, 2023

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

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Dr. David Waddington, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee