Employability skills for future marketing professionals

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study investigates how digital transformation has disrupted the marketing career path by analysing the most in-demand marketing skills and identifying opportunities for future marketing professionals. Through a content analysis of job advertisements and a cross-country survey of marketing professionals, the study proposes a framework defining the skillset required of marketing professionals to start and move forward in their career. The study identifies five employability skill categories and 29 skills and capabilities. The relevance of such categories is also analysed across lowly and highly digitalised firms. This research contributes to the debate on the employability of new graduates and provides useful directions to universities, tertiary education institutions, and companies to support the marketing talents of the future.

1. Introduction

Over the past 15 years, the digital transformation of businesses has revolutionised the role of marketing within firms. The widespread adoption of digital marketing practices, especially social media and mobile marketing, has significantly influenced the way through which firms and customers embrace new Internet-based technologies, behave, interact, collaborate, and co-create value (Cova, Dalli, & Zwick, 2011; Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b). The digital transformation of marketing is driving marketing in practice, requiring firms to rethink their marketing strategies by hiring new professional profiles, and creating new organisational structures to succeed in the digital domain (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Royle & Laing, 2014). While Internet-based technologies have enabled the enhancement of traditional marketing principles and strategies, they have been far more disruptive with reference to marketing skills and functions (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011). The 'old' professions based on traditional push (outbound) one-to-many communication paradigms (Kerr & Kelly, 2017; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008; Schultz

& Patti, 2009; Vernuccio & Ceccotti, 2015) are being replaced by new marketing job positions focused on managing many-to-many interactive communication flows. Consumers are now more engaged and empowered, having become active producers of user-generated content (UGC) and, in some cases, co-producers of brand-related content (Vernuccio & Ceccotti, 2015). Hence, the digital transformation of marketing has posed a systemic phase change in marketing and communication practices, developing a parallel and fragmented world focused on digital media (Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström, & Freundt, 2014; Mulhern, 2009). In this world, new job positions have emerged, with job titles revealing a dominant need to reconcile the new with the old and reshape the marketing function.

While this evolution is under way, the cornerstones of marketing theory and practice are far from obsolete (Mulhern, 2009; Royle & Laing, 2014). The study of Hamid Saleh (2016), Hamid Saleh (2016) reveals that from 2010 to 2014, the *Journal of Marketing* has given more importance to articles focusing on traditional marketing themes, such as customer relationship and customer loyalty, service and service quality, international marketing, sales and sales management, and branding. In this perspective, it is of paramount importance that marketing managers of tomorrow develop a) robust knowledge of marketing theory, b) a creative mind to introduce innovations in the marketing process, and c) soft skills to understand the technicalities connected to digital marketing (Ackerman, Gross, & Perner, 2003; Alpert, Heaney, & Kuhn, 2009; Kerr & Proud, 2005)(Ackerman et al., 2003; Alpert et al.,

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2009; Kerr & Proud, 2005).

Previous literature has focused on understanding the fit between the requirements of the job market and universities' curricula (Mauri, Di Gregorio, Mazzucchelli, & Maggioni, 2017; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Mulhern, 2009; Pefanis Schlee & Harich, 2010; Royle & Laing, 2014), while research focusing on job positions and the new skills that marketing graduates require to succeed in the digital domain remains scarce. This study seeks to address this gap and to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by proposing a new framework regarding the employability skills of marketing graduates. Taking the firm perspective, this study makes a four-fold contribution. First, the research offers a comprehensive view of the changing nature of marketing job positions and skills required in the new digital domain. Second, the work analyses marketing job opportunities for graduates by comparing highly versus lowly digitalised firms. Third, the research examines knowledge, capabilities, and skills marketing that graduates should develop to be hired and succeed in their careers in the new digital era and how this skillset differs according to the level of firm digitalisation and across countries. Finally, the study presents a new framework related to the digital marketing skillset and professions of the future centred around the omni-channel customer experience.

The paper is structured as follows. After a review of the relevant literature, results from a survey of marketing practitioners operating in five European countries are presented to provide a picture of the new marketing professions and job positions created by the digital transformation of marketing. Findings are discussed and organised into a framework highlighting the most valuable skills and personal characteristics to face the challenges posed by a digital domain. The framework can guide firms in reconfiguring their organisational structure with new positions and skills as well as academic institutions in educating marketing students in a more effective way.

2. Review of the relevant literature

The ever-changing and complex needs of the contemporary workplace force business graduates to develop adequate skills to succeed in their career (Bennett, 2010; Turley & Geiger, 2006). The debate in the past 10 years has mainly taken place in journals dedicated to pedagogy and education, and it has revolved around employability factors (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013), graduates' skills gap (Evans, Nancarrow, Tapp, & Stone, 2002; Kelley & Bridges, 2005; Walker et al., 2009), and the academic–practical world gap (Coates & Koemer, 1996; Payne, Campbell, Bal, & Piercy, 2011; Wellman, 2010; Wymbs, 2011).

Previous literature has provided evidence on the desired skills required to operate in the marketing field. Bennett (2010) developed a list of 14 attributes to be successful in marketing and found that initiative, motivation, communication, IT, and presentation skills were the most demanded competences in marketing job advertisements. Based on a content analysis of 250 online-advertised posts for entry-level marketing positions, Wellman (2010) found that work planning and prioritisation, general and written communications, and office ICT applications are the mostly searched attributes, while creativity and innovation, as well as attention to detail, are the top desired personality traits. In another study based on an extensive survey of students, faculty, and recruiters (Hopkins, Raymond, & Carlson, 2011), soft skills also ranked at the top, including taking initiative, team-working, interpersonal skills, oral communication, motivation, and personal selling (Hopkins et al., 2011). A similar result was obtained by Finch et al. (2013), who interviewed 115 employers. Even if soft

skills may be considered as a support to knowledge, nonetheless they are a pre-requisite for a successful marketing professional (Walker et al., 2009)(Walker et al., 2009). Although these studies provide an articulated picture of the marketing profession, they failed to consider the impact of the digital transformation on employability.

Even if technology may be considered as an enabler of classic marketing theories and principles, its impact requires marketing graduates to develop extensive knowledge of the specific digital tools and of how they can support marketing strategy and operations (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Royle & Laing, 2014). However, the digital revolution has disrupted the marketing landscape, transforming not only the way marketing strategies are developed and implemented, but also the role of marketing within an organisation (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Kerr & Kelly, 2017)(Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011), and revolutionising marketing research, marketing communication, customer relationship management, and channel management (Quinn, Dibb, Simkin, Canhoto, & Analogbei, 2016). Focused on customer centricity, the 'New Marketing DNA' (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011) puts forward an emerging set of capabilities, including digital marketing communication, data mining, analytics, predictive analysis, and online channels. Such a technical skillset must go hand in hand with the development of marketing skills (Brady, Fellenz, & Brookes, 2008). In this regard, Royle and Laing (2014) propose a 'Digital Marketer Model': an integrated strategic approach that identifies both strategic business knowledge of digital marketing and specific technical skills, such as technological knowledge, measurement monitoring and evaluation skills, and strategic integration of digital marketing skills within the existing marketing approach. Benson, Morgan, and Filippaios (2014) highlight how ICT, social media skills, and usage of Internet-based technologies are increasingly considered important in marketing job positions. In this context, marketing roles and functions are working towards including and integrating traditional marketing skills with new digital skills; the digital world crosses the traditional professions of marketing and either creates completely new roles or forces to redesign traditional professions in the marketing area (Mulhern, 2009; Royle & Laing, 2014).

Some firms have embraced the digital world and are highly involved in digital marketing, while others have approached digitalisation at a slower pace. This study compares the needs and requirements in terms of job positions among highly versus lowly digitalised firms and points out the skills that marketing graduates should develop to succeed in a new labour market centred on customers and digital technology. The study offers a European view of this phenomenon by surveying marketing professionals across five countries: Italy, France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

3. Method

This research is articulated in two phases: an exploratory study conducted in Italy and a cross-country comparison run in five European countries. The exploratory phase adopts a multi-method approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative components to analyse the changing nature of marketing roles, functions, and skills required of marketing graduates in the new digital domain. The cross-country phase is based on a survey of marketing professionals across five countries.

3.1. Exploratory phase

3.1.1. Qualitative research component

A content analysis of job advertisements published both online and offline was carried out using Nvivo Capture and Nvivo11

(McMillan, 2000). The study analysed the content of 'Work with us', 'Job Opportunities', and 'Careers' web pages of the top 100 firms of 'Future Brand Index 2015' ranking, of the Big Four consulting companies, of the five top Italian universities, and of the three main employment marketplaces (LinkedIn, Adecco, and Monster), using 'marketing' as the primary keyword for the screening. Only job advertisements requiring or indicating preference for marketing graduates were included in the sample. Data collection covered one month, retrieving a total sample of 359 job advertisements, which were organised in a database listing the company name, job title, date of publication, geographical location, type of work, basic requirements, and desired skills.

In addition to the online job advertisements analysis, the *Corriere della Sera*, a daily newspaper nationally known for issuing job advertisements weekly, was used as a source to capture longitudinal trends in the job market for marketing graduates. Applying the same selection criteria as per the online analysis, all relevant job advertisements published in the 'Corriere TrovoLavoro' section of the newspaper were retrieved in 2010 and 2015. A total of 417 marketing job advertisements were added to the database previously created.

As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), data were analysed looking for recurring themes and concepts, specifically with reference to work type, basic requirements, and desired skills. Content analysis was performed, and a coding was carried out to tag job descriptions marketing job opportunities (Krippendorff, 2018) by grouping together keywords, synonyms, and related attributes and assigning to each node either the most representative job title or the most representative skill title (Wellman, 2010).

3.1.2. Quantitative research component

Data collection was conducted through an online survey of marketing practitioners in the Italian market. The sample was sourced through the LeFAC database in order to reach marketing practitioners from a wide range of industries and different company sizes. The LeFAC database stores information about key executives of firms that operate in Italy and invest in marketing and communication activities. A selection criterion was applied to ensure that participants were in the position to identify and evaluate the requirements for a successful marketing career, specifically for marketing graduates (Kelley & Bridges, 2005).

A preliminary questionnaire was designed based on the literature review and the findings from the qualitative research component. To examine the reliability and clarity of the questionnaire, a pre-test was carried out involving 10 marketing practitioners. The final flow of the questionnaire was articulated in four sections: a) digitalisation, b) job opportunities, c) graduates' knowledge and skills, and d) demographics.

The survey was distributed to 16,183 contacts via the online survey platform Lime survey. The final sample comprised 1,562 valid responses, with an overall response rate of about 10%. This response rate is in line with the common standards for online-based surveys (Anseel, Lievens, Schollaert, & Choragwicka, 2010; Cycyota & Harrison, 2006)(Anseel et al., 2010; Cycyota & Harrison, 2006). Respondents hold positions in marketing (45%), sales (23%), communication (15%), and general management (7%). Data were analysed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2010) to identify macro categories of skills.

3.2. Cross-country phase

The exploratory phase provided the basis to develop a cross-country survey focused on assessing the relevance of the new digital skillset in the four other European countries: France,

Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The sample was sourced through a global online panel provider, targeting marketing practitioners. We collected $n = 125$ responses in each of the four European countries. To account for the level of digitalisation, an index was computed by averaging the number of activities conducted using digital channels and the number of digital channels used by the company for its marketing activities. The digital index allows to distinguish among lowly, moderately, and highly digitalised firms across the five European countries. Lowly digitalised companies use on average at least three digital channels to conduct between one and four marketing activities, showing a digitalisation index ranging between 0 and 0.42. Moderately digitalised firms use on average at least five digital channels to conduct between five and seven marketing activities, showing a digitalisation index ranging between 0.43 and 0.79. Highly digitalised firms use on average at least seven digital channels to conduct between eight and nine marketing activities, showing a digitalisation index ranging between 0.80 and 1. Data were analysed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and EFA (Hair et al., 2010).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Exploratory phase: longitudinal analysis of job opportunities for marketing graduates

Data show how the last 15 years have been characterised by an increasingly rapid evolution towards digital transformation of business processes. In 2000, the *Corriere della Sera* dedicated 23 to 25 pages per week to job advertisements, representing a fundamental tool to assist both demand and supply in the job market. Job advertisement content was rich and detailed, often celebrated companies' achievements, and was written in a way to target a specific applicant type. In 2010, 10 years later, the situation had dramatically changed. The *Corriere della Sera* pages dedicated to job advertisements decreased significantly (on average five instead of 24) and were positioned at the end of the newspaper. From 2010 to 2015, the newspaper pages dedicated to job advertisements decreased further by almost 30% (on average from 124 pages/year to 88). Within these pages, job advertisements focused on job titles related to the marketing function fell by around 7% (from 216 ad/year to 201), with on average four marketing advertisements per week (from 4.1 ad/week in 2010 to 3.8 in 2015). Despite this decrease in offline job advertisements, since 2015 the newspaper pages have directed readers to browse the online job search engine 'trovolavoro.it'. These results suggest that the job market has undergone a digital transformation by definitely moving online on dedicated websites. Since the digital transformation has become imperative (Fitzgerald, Kruschwitz, Bonnet, & Welch, 2013), offline job postings have lost their popularity in favour of online platforms.

In relation to the 359 online job advertisements, among the working positions that are in great demand, brand/product manager ranks first (15%), followed by trade marketing manager (11%), marketing specialist (10%), and business development specialist (8%). More 'traditional' job titles hold the top five positions, while the following job titles are more 'digital', 'social', and 'customer-centred', such as customer experience manager, digital marketing manager, content producer, customer relationship manager, social media manager, e-commerce manager, SEO/SEM manager, community manager, and programmatic advertising manager. The 417 offline job advertisements and the results from the survey portray a similar picture, with brand/product manager ranking first in terms of popularity, followed by digital job positions. These results suggest that brand/product manager has been the most requested role in the marketing area over the past years, and it will also be in the near future. After more than 80 years, the brand management

system is now more alive than ever (Low & Fullerton, 1994)(Low & Fullerton, 1994). Brand/product manager is not an emerging profession in the area of marketing, but it remains key to address the challenges generated by the digital revolution.

Looking to the future, the majority of the respondents across the five European countries identified digital and online marketing professions as the most promising jobs, recognising digital marketing manager as the key job position of the future, followed by social media manager, e-commerce manager, and big data analyst (Table 1). The digital transformation has opened the door to other professions that either complement or integrate the offline and online worlds. This is the case of marketing roles such as customer experience manager, customer relationship manager, and e-commerce manager, who are responsible for managing customers across a variety of touchpoints and channels. From an omnichannel perspective, nurturing a customer-focused culture within the organisation represents one of the top challenges of customer experience management and one of the main obstacles in terms of organisational structure (Manser Payne, Peltier, & Barger, 2017; Peppers & Rogers, 2017) (Neslin & Shankar, 2009) (Neslin & Shankar, 2009). Hence, this study suggests that there is a tendency to re-think and reconfigure the company's organisational structure towards a more integrated management of the customer experience.

EFA using a principal components extraction and a promax rotation was carried out to uncover the factorial structure of the 29 skills and to group them into categories. Five employability skill categories were identified, explaining 63.4% of the variance in the model. These employability skill categories are: basic soft skills, analytical skills, digital and technical skills, core marketing skills, and customer insight skills (Table 2). All factor loadings show values greater than 0.5, except the *stress resilience* item.

Basic soft skills. In line with previous research (Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven, & Furnham, 2010; Finch et al., 2013), basic soft skills are more and more valued by employers and are an important predictor of employability. They include graduates' willingness to take initiative, team-working capabilities, interpersonal skills, motivation, flexibility, verbal and written communication skills, and stress resilience.

Analytical skills. Analytical skills include capabilities and knowledge related to data analysis, critical interpretation, and effective presentation. Harrigan and Hulbert (2011) highlight how analytical skills are in short supply among marketing graduates, and they suggest marketing educators change marketing curricula by integrating data analysis in marketing courses and developing new courses completely dedicated to analytical skills. This is still an urgent need, as data-informed marketing, statistical knowledge, problem-solving, and the ability to synthesise information into meaningful and actionable reports are still greatly valued by marketing practitioners. With data becoming the world's most valuable resource, what is on shortage is the capability to visualise, articulate, and solve complex problems based on data using the most effective techniques and to critically interpret results to serve businesses' purposes.

Digital and technical skills. Digital and technical skills concern new technology-related skills, digital marketing capabilities and knowledge, and other specific skills currently needed to face the digital environment. By the end of the 1990s, the rapid growth of the Internet and the digitisation of marketing relationships (Varadarajan & Yadav, 2009) had stimulated businesses to reconfigure their marketing strategies. The knowledge of social media, mobile applications, e-commerce, analytics and real time practices, and more in general of the Internet and software is not only technical knowledge, but reflects a broader domain, in which content and technicalities are merged into a new holistic approach toward content and marketing communication (Rowley, 2008; Royle & Laing, 2014). In line with the extant literature (Gilbert, 2017; Quinton & Simkin, 2017), the findings also suggest that marketing graduates should understand the nuances of the new web paradigms, how these paradigms interact, how each of the social and digital channels operates and interacts with each other, and the synergies that could be created. In this light, marketing graduates should develop a wide variety of digital and technical skills to meet these evolving job requirements.

Core marketing skills. Core marketing skills are related more to the organisation of marketing activities than to the specific knowledge of the marketing discipline, which is taken for granted. In fact, these skills include creative thinking to generate contents relevant for different customers' touchpoints, effective planning and time management, and precision and attention to details.

Customer insight skills. Customers have always been the focus of the marketing discipline. In fact, the AMA definition of marketing puts customer value as the core of the marketing concept (American Marketing Association, 2013). The fact that customer insight skills emerge as a separate employability category reveals that customer focus is not enough: the choice of the most appropriate research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, and the knowledge of customers are necessary but not sufficient conditions. Customer intelligence must then be put into practice by connecting in the most effective and efficient way the company and its brand with the right customers through customer relationship management and relational skills. These considerations are at the core of the customer-led marketing approach of the 'New Marketing DNA' proposed by Harrigan and Hulbert (2011), according to which customer insight skills seem to be one of the genes to be developed to connect the organisation to its customers.

4.2. Cross-country analysis: the employability skillset of marketing graduates

The cross-country analysis reveals that basic soft skills are considered as the most important by marketing practitioners from each country (Table 3). Even if basic soft skills are not typically interpreted as academic skills (Finch et al., 2013), academic marketing curricula should integrate these skills in their course portfolios by developing appropriate pedagogical methods. The result suggests that having and demonstrating strong and effective basic soft skills will help marketing graduates to be hired and to be more competitive in the European job market.

Core marketing skills follow basic soft skills in the definition of the skillset of marketing graduates in four out of five countries. Although soft skills seem to be in higher demand, the knowledge of marketing management theories and applications is of paramount importance when evaluating a new hire.

Table 1
Most promising job positions of the future.

	Italy	France	Germany	Spain	United Kingdom
1	Digital Marketing manager	Digital marketing manager	Digital marketing manager	Digital marketing manager	Digital marketing manager
2	Social media manager	Sales manager	Social media manager	E-commerce manager	Social media manager
3	Big data/Data analyst	Manager/Director	Marketing communication manager	Social media manager	Big data/Data analyst

Table 2
The employability skillset of marketing graduates.

Category	Factor Loadings[a]	Cronbach's Alpha
Basic soft skills	3.02 (E)	0.770
Initiative	0.662	
Teamwork	0.708	
Interpersonal skills	0.714	
Motivation	0.627	
Flexibility	0.713	
Oral communication and presentation skills	0.651	
Stress resilience	0.487	
Digital and technical skills	2.56 (E)	0.724
Knowledge of social media	0.707	
Knowledge of Mobile	0.529	
Knowledge of E-commerce	0.705	
Knowledge of Analytics and real time practices	0.716	
Knowledge of Internet & software knowledge	0.660	
SEO & SEM	0.582	
Core marketing skills	2.51 (E)	0.717
Planning, organisation and time management	0.675	
Contents creation across channel	0.633	
Creative thinking	0.650	
Precision and attention to detail	0.661	
Sales knowledge and management skills	0.659	
Ability to manage multiple marketing tasks	0.598	
Analytical skills	2.17 (E)	0.716
Data-driven/data-oriented	0.744	
Good conceptual and analytical skills	0.751	
Statistical knowledge	0.706	
Problem-solving	0.744	
Critical thinking	0.705	
Ability to synthesise information into meaningful and actionable reports	0.714	
Customer insights skills	1.72 (E)	0.514
Knowledge of company and of its customers	0.675	
Knowledge of research methods	0.663	
Knowledge of customer touchpoints and journey	0.708	
CRM and relational skills	0.575	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.0.835
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4378.619
	Df	190
	Sig.	.000

[a] E means Eigenvalue.

Table 3
Cross-country importance of employability skills.

	Italy		France		Germany		Spain		United Kingdom	
	μ	σ	μ	σ	M	σ	μ	σ	μ	σ
Basic soft skills	6.06	0.95	5.01	0.86	5.47	0.89	5.15	0.99	5.34	0.92
Digital and technical skills	5.94	1.02	4.72	0.98	4.94	0.96	5.07	1.03	5.10	0.91
Core marketing skills	5.75	1.11	4.87	0.92	5.13	0.94	5.10	0.94	5.22	0.83
Analytical skills	6.02	0.96	4.59	0.90	5.10	0.88	4.95	1.02	5.17	0.85
Customer insights skills	5.44	1.52	4.8	0.97	4.86	0.91	4.99	1.04	5.05	0.98

Analytical skills are highly regarded in three out of five countries. The evidence that the quantitative and analytical nature of marketing (Floyd & Gordon, 1998; Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Mitchell & Strauss, 2001) is not separated from marketing management stimulates reflection on the configuration of the academic marketing curricula. In marketing management, analytical skills are of paramount importance to effectively develop and implement successful strategies. Although marketing graduates are usually exposed to capstone courses in statistics and mathematics, the analytical skills required by the job market go beyond the basics and value the ability of critically interpreting data, figures, and statistics to inform marketing decisions.

Although the professions of the future will gravitate toward the digital world, digital and technical skills rank within the top three most important skills for marketing graduates only in Italy and Spain. It thus might be expected that digital-related knowledge could be learned on the job. On the contrary, soft skills and core marketing capabilities are much more complex to develop, requiring longer training, good integration between emotional and social intelligence, and effective marketing practice. This result confirms that there is still a disparity between the degree of importance attributed by European marketing practitioners to emotional intelligence competencies and the levels displayed by marketing graduates (Jameson, Carthy, McGuinness, & McSweeney, 2016).

4.3. Cross-country analysis: employability skills and level of firm digitalisation

A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test was conducted in each country to assess how the importance of each employability skill category included in the

digital skillset differs according to the level of firm digitalisation (Table 4). The results show a significant difference across digital level groups for basic soft skills in Italy, with highly digitalised firms giving significantly more importance to such skills. In Italy, the same pattern is observed for core marketing skills, with highly digitalised firms attributing significantly stronger relevance to this employability skill category.

Moreover, in Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom, highly digitalised companies weight digital and technical skills more than lowly or moderately digitalised companies. Thus, the findings reveal a statistically significant effect of firm digitalisation level on the importance of employability skill categories in three countries. Conversely, the level of firm digitalisation does not impact the importance of the different components of the marketing graduates' skillset in Spain and France.

Taken together, these results suggest that highly digitalised firms differ from other firms, as they give primary importance to digital and technical skills, followed by core marketing and basic soft skills, in most countries. The findings highlight a key difference in focus when evaluating marketing graduate profiles according to the level of firm digitalisation. This should be considered by brand-new graduates when targeting companies with their applications, as well as by universities when developing specialised programmes and courses aiming at educating marketing managers of the future.
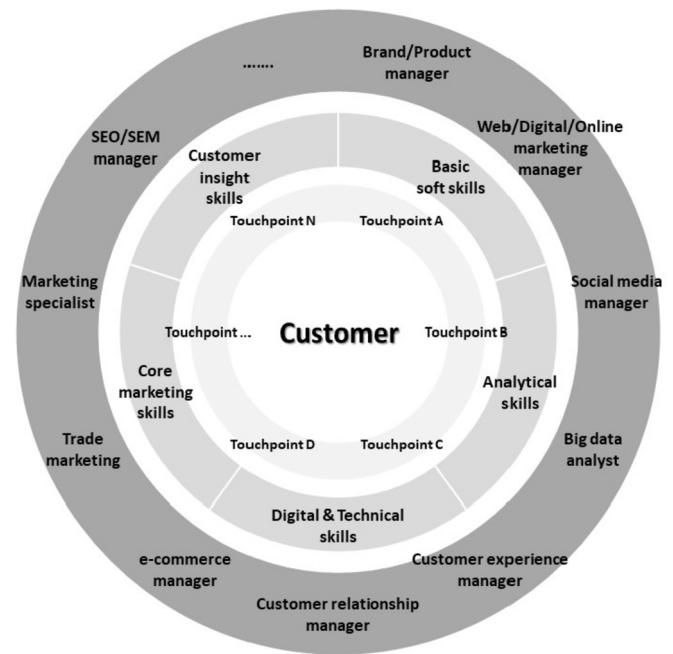
4.4. Toward an integrated model of customer-centred skills

Based on our findings, this study proposes an integrated model of employability skills in the marketing field (Fig. 1). The model is rooted in the concept of customer-centricity and has at its core customers surrounded by the touchpoints through which they connect with the company/brand. The spokes of the wheel identify the five employability skill categories that marketing graduates should develop during their studies to be hired: basic soft skills,

Fig. 1. Integrated model of customer-centred skills.

analytical skills, digital and technical skills, core marketing skills, and customer insight skills. These skills do not qualify a specific marketing position, but rather define the skillset that any marketing student should develop to enhance his/her employability in the marketing field (Pefanis Schlee & Harich, 2010). Once marketing graduates are equipped with the required skills, they are more likely to have access to a broad portfolio of marketing job opportunities.

The study also provides insights into how the level of firm

Table 4
One-way ANOVA: Employability skills and level of digitalisation.

	Lowly Digitalised μ	Moderately Digitalised μ	Highly Digitalised μ	Sum of Squares (Between Groups)	df	Mean square	F	p-value
Italy								
Basic soft skills	5.80	5.81	6.11	6.538	2	3.269	3.716	.025
Digital and technical skills	5.54	5.88	6.29	56.511	2	28.256	40.616	.000
Core marketing skills	5.71	5.86	6.13	15.844	2	7.922	11.188	.000
Analytical skills	5.87	5.88	6.03	1.672	2	.836	.959	.383
Customer insights skills	4.75	4.73	5.11	10.214	2	5.107	2.158	.116
France								
Basic soft skills	4.80	5.05	5.22	2.369	2	1.184	1.604	0.205
Digital and technical skills	4.67	4.72	4.83	0.335	2	0.168	0.172	0.842
Core marketing skills	4.72	4.94	4.89	1.098	2	0.549	0.642	0.528
Analytical skills	4.56	4.56	4.75	0.582	2	0.291	0.355	0.702
Customer insights skills	4.69	4.86	4.92	0.885	2	0.443	0.468	0.627
Germany								
Basic soft skills	5.47	5.39	5.65	1.464	2	0.732	0.931	0.397
Digital and technical skills	4.55	4.87	5.40	10.607	2	5.303	6.220	0.003
Core marketing skills	5.09	5.05	5.33	1.806	2	0.903	1.030	0.360
Analytical skills	4.84	5.06	5.37	4.138	2	2.069	2.752	0.068
Customer insights skills	4.56	4.86	5.09	3.728	2	1.864	2.281	0.107
United Kingdom								
Basic soft skills	5.18	5.25	5.61	3.630	2	1.815	2.174	0.118
Digital and technical skills	4.76	5.09	5.37	5.123	2	2.561	3.227	0.043
Core marketing skills	5.02	5.16	5.48	3.379	2	1.689	2.488	0.087
Analytical skills	4.91	5.17	5.38	3.061	2	1.531	2.166	0.119
Customer insights skills	4.61	5.04	5.35	7.558	2	3.779	4.159	0.018
Spain								
Basic soft skills	5.18	5.06	5.31	1.507	2	0.754	0.766	0.467
Digital and technical skills	4.60	5.04	5.25	3.562	2	1.781	1.685	0.190
Core marketing skills	4.83	5.10	5.18	0.951	2	0.475	0.531	0.590
Analytical skills	4.46	4.91	5.16	4.173	2	2.087	2.021	0.137
Customer insights skills	4.38	5.00	5.15	4.692	2	2.346	2.233	0.112

digitalisation impacts the importance given to the different employability skill categories by marketing managers when recruiting and screening marketing graduates' profiles. While highly digitalised firms prioritise digital and technical skills, lowly digitalised firms appreciate analytical skills the most.

The increasing awareness that the customer is the real asset of the company has stimulated companies to integrate the customer dimension into the more traditional brand management system (Low & Fullerton, 1994). With the development of digital technologies, customers have begun to interact with companies through both physical and virtual touchpoints, which customers combine in many different ways in their shopping journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The shopping journey can be interpreted as the relationship path that starts in a touchpoint and then develops and grows by crossing other touchpoints selected according to the needs that they can satisfy (Neslin et al., 2006). The rapidity with which customers shift from one touchpoint to another, from physical to digital, and from one device to another, requires a strong effort to understand the whole path without losing sight of the single customer. To reach a single view of the customer, all the marketing job positions identified must be tuned on the customer and the touchpoints he/she is using by combining the five categories of skills to maximise the value of customer knowledge. While the literature has shown that a 100% singular view of the customer does not always pay off (Neslin et al., 2006) and that the biggest obstacle to consistent customer experience is system and data integration (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services Report, 2014; Neslin et al., 2006; Neslin & Shankar, 2009), there is no question that customer experience management provides competitive advantage. Hence, if new marketing graduates possess both technical and core skills, they are better equipped to contribute to the changes necessary for effective customer experience management.

5. Conclusions

This paper contributes to the debate over how the digital transformation is impacting the marketing profession and the job opportunities available to new graduates by providing a European view of the employability skills marketing graduates need to develop. In a world where mass education is becoming available in an unparalleled way, academic education is becoming business-like and gives increasing attention to expectations of companies, employer stakeholders, governments, as well as students (Uncles, 2018). In addition, the digital revolution is bringing a dramatic change in how marketing is practiced and the nature of marketing roles within firms (Quinn et al., 2016).

By analysing the job market and the perceptions of European marketing and communication executives, the study assists both companies and universities in understanding the changing nature of the skills and capabilities required to start a successful career in marketing in the new digital domain. First, the study provides a longitudinal perspective on the evolution of the marketing profession.

Although the job market has heavily moved to online platforms and specialised websites, the traditional job title of brand/product manager still holds a strong position no matter the level of digitalisation of a company. This clearly suggests that the strategic nature and core activities ascribed to the marketing profession are still in great demand in the new digital era. However, the skillset and capabilities required to conduct such activities has broadened, expanding job opportunities towards digital, analytical, and technical roles. At the European level, digital marketing manager, social media manager, e-commerce manager, and big data analyst have been unanimously identified as the key job positions of the future.

The study identifies five employability skills categories: basic soft skills, analytical skills, digital and technical skills, core marketing skills, and customer insight skills. Even though new skills and capabilities are arising, our findings suggest that basic soft skills and core marketing skills are of critical importance in the new digital domain across Europe. New marketing graduates aiming at developing an international career cannot neglect to develop the building blocks of the marketing profession, i.e. core capabilities linked to organisation, planning, critical thinking, and strategic acumen. Companies also require new graduates to invest in and develop their soft skills to succeed in a marketing career, with team work, flexibility, and interpersonal skills being among the most appreciated talents. Alongside these competences, the study shows how analytical, digital, and technical skills are currently in high demand and will be increasingly more so in the future. However, digital capabilities are not replacing the traditional marketing skills. In all the countries analysed by the study, integration among soft, managerial, and technical skills is encouraged. This is particularly true for highly digitalised firms, which are leading the charge in harmonising the marketing skillset by offering digital, social, and customer-centred job opportunities.

Indeed, in most countries, highly digitalised firms give primary importance to digital and technical skills, followed by core marketing and basic soft skills. The integration and harmonisation of the marketing skillset represent a real challenge that both practitioners and academics should face to ensure that traditional and digital marketing activities collaborate and create synergies to deliver value to current and prospective customers.

Besides the relevance to practitioners in generating a deeper understanding of today's marketing job market, this study has critical implications for universities and marketing students. The integrated model of customer-centred skills can assist universities in identifying the current gaps in academic curricula and re-designing degree programmes to equip graduates with the appropriate skillset to operate in the digital domain. This will help bridge the historical gap between theory and practice, which has been one of the most fervently debated issues in the discipline (Hunt, 2002). The study also provides clear guidelines for prospective students when selecting degree programmes and for brand-new graduates approaching the job market and investing in their career to become the marketing managers of the future.

6. Limitations and implications for further research

This research has some limitations, which offer opportunities for future research. First, the data consider only the marketing managers and recruiters' perspective with reference to the job markets of five European countries. Future research will benefit from examining views in other European and non-European countries and focusing on different company functions, such as strategy, finance, accounting, human resources, and operations. Analysing different company functions could also contribute to a better understanding of the specific skillset required of graduates in the broader discipline of business management.

Finally, the study does not focus on a specific industry and does not investigate the extent to which different industries may request different categories of skills from marketing graduates. In fact, some of the job positions and some of the skills required of marketing graduates could be prioritised differently on the basis of the industry a firm operates in. Although the study provides a longitudinal perspective on the evolution of the marketing job positions, further research is required to understand future patterns and identify emerging opportunities for current marketing students.

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