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**“THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA
PLATFORMS AND THE FUTURE OF
MARKETING STRATEGY: FROM SOCIAL
NETWORKS TO ALGORITHM-DRIVEN MEDIA
ECOSYSTEMS”**

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the digital marketing landscape has undergone a radical structural transformation, evolving from a supplementary communication channel into the primary battleground for corporate competitiveness. As global markets, particularly the cosmetics and beauty industry, reach unprecedented levels of physical saturation, the functional attributes of a product are no longer sufficient to secure long-term market share. Today, technological parity in manufacturing has driven brands into a "commodity trap," forcing them to engineer differential value entirely through digital customer experiences.

Simultaneously, the foundational architecture of the internet has shifted. The open, relational networks of the early Web 2.0 era have been replaced by highly monetized, algorithmically driven media ecosystems governed by artificial intelligence. This shift has dismantled the traditional, linear customer decision-making journey. In native social commerce environments, algorithms compress the stages of inspiration, evaluation, and transaction into a singular, instantaneous digital event. While this funnel compression eliminates logistical friction, it introduces a severe strategic dilemma: the absolute democratization of AI-generated content has created severe cognitive noise and historic levels of consumer skepticism. In a digital environment saturated with synthetic, mathematically perfect corporate messaging, raw human authenticity has become the ultimate and most scarce market asset.

This thesis investigates how modern enterprise brands can successfully navigate this hyper-saturated, algorithm-driven environment. The central objective is to demonstrate that sustainable competitive advantage in the modern digital economy requires a dual operational model: deploying predictive AI and algorithmic structures strictly as distribution engines, while relying on un-retouched, purpose-driven human validation (Earned Media) to drive the actual conversion.

To systematically explore this dynamic, the research is structured into three chapters. Chapter 1 analyzes the structural transition of digital media, outlining the rise of the algorithmic interest graph and the compression of the traditional marketing funnel into instantaneous social commerce. Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical and strategic framework required to survive this landscape, detailing the resolution of the AI authenticity paradox and the integration of the Paid, Earned, and Owned Media (POEM) model. Finally, Chapter 3 applies this theoretical framework to a definitive case history: Fenty Beauty. By analyzing Fenty Beauty's disruptive "Beauty for all" positioning, its strategic orchestration of User-Generated Content, and its mastery of omnichannel retail integration, this thesis provides a comprehensive blueprint for sustainable digital market dominance.

Ancona, July 2026,

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CHAPTER 1

THE BIG SHIFT IN THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

1.1 From social graphs to interest graphs: the rise of the "entertainment first" model

To thoroughly understand the contemporary digital marketing landscape, it is first necessary to define the foundational infrastructure of social networks and the technological mechanics that govern them. Academically, social media are defined as internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of User-Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, modern academic literature expands this definition, viewing social media not merely as simple communication tools, but as complex, technology-centric ecosystems where dynamic behaviors, interactions, and exchanges occur between interconnected actors, including individuals, firms, and institutions (Appel et al., 2020). As these platforms, such as Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook, have scaled billions of global users, the great volume of daily content has made it impossible to present information in a simple chronological order without causing severe cognitive overload for the user. Consequently, platforms rely entirely on algorithms, which are specifically defined in computer science as recommender systems or information filtering systems. These are sophisticated mathematical rule sets and machine-learning models designed to predict and suggest content most relevant to a particular individual. They operate by continuously mining granular user data to execute techniques such as collaborative filtering (identifying patterns among users with similar behaviors) and content-based filtering (recommending media similar to what a user previously engaged with). By processing thousands of behavioral signals per second, the primary objective of these algorithms is to curate a hyper-personalized digital feed that maximizes user attention and long-term platform retention. Understanding this algorithmic foundation is crucial, because the digital landscape

is currently witnessing a transition from the “social graph,” defined by interpersonal connections, to the “interest graph,” where algorithmic curation dictates the flow of information and entertainment. While the initial digital revolution focused on the convergence of media through the World Wide Web, the current evolutionary phase represents a second, deeper shift. This shift moves away from the mere transmission and hosting of static information toward the active, AI-driven curation of human experience. Consequently, the traditional definition of social media is fast becoming obsolete; it is rapidly being replaced by the concept of “content media.”

What the market is facing right now is a “Big Shift”: moving away from a world of interpersonal communication (social networking) toward a paradigm where consumers engage with content served by automated recommendation models (media ecosystems) (Appel et al., 2020). The early iterations of Web 2.0 relied heavily on the Social Graph. Under this architecture, the network’s value was derived from the explicit mapping of relations between users, often referred to as “strong ties” (family and close friends) or “weak ties” (acquaintances). Content distribution was highly restricted by these relational nodes: an individual or a brand could only broadcast messages to those who had explicitly chosen to “follow” or “friend” them. As characterized by Ferrero (2023), corporate digital marketing within this environment was largely a relational exercise focused on community cultivation, organic word-of-mouth (WOM), and long-term loyalty building. The primary strategic objective was the accumulation of social capital via an enclosed network of followers.

Conversely, the modern Interest Graph decouples content distribution from social connectivity. The distribution mechanism shifts from a user-directed model to an algorithm-driven matrix. Pioneered by platforms like TikTok and subsequently emulated through Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, the Interest Graph processes real-time behavioral vectors rather than static relational connections. Automated recommendation systems do not prioritize who a user is

connected to, but rather how that user implicitly interacts with hyper-specific content categories. By monitoring even the tiniest behavioral signals, such as down-to-the-millisecond dwell time, completion rates, loop frequencies, and immediate skip patterns, machine learning models synthesize a fluid, infinite stream of media tailored precisely to the user's subconscious preferences. This transition toward an entertainment-first model implies that brand visibility is no longer a guaranteed structural return on a large, historically accumulated follower base. Instead, visibility has become the dynamic outcome of contextual content relevance, mathematically calculated by predictive algorithms (Appel et al., 2020).

This algorithmic pervasiveness has expanded beyond the boundaries of traditional, dedicated applications, culminating in what literature defines as an "omni-social" presence (Appel et al., 2020). In the foundational stages of social platforms, digital interactivity was contained within specific virtual environments (e.g., early Facebook or desktop forums). In the contemporary digital economy, however, social functionality has become completely ordinary, embedded deeply within traditionally non-social applications and fundamental mobile operating systems. Prototypical examples include the integration of collaborative social layers within travel platforms like TripAdvisor, or peer-to-peer sharing dynamics within music streaming infrastructures like Spotify. From a holistic marketing perspective, the omni-social reality indicates that virtually every single stage of the modern consumer's decision-making funnel has been flattened and exposed to external social algorithmic influence. Need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, and post-purchase behavior no longer occur in separate, insulated linear sequences. Instead, they happen simultaneously within the content stream. This structural flattening drives a profound cultural shift where digital creators transcend their niche platforms to become mainstream cultural icons, and physical spaces are engineered from their inception to satisfy digital distribution metrics. This specific intersection highlights a broader macroeconomic trend: the complete convergence of online and offline

realities. As argued by Appel et al. (2020), the modern consumer functions within an environment where virtual behaviors actively dictate physical experiences and vice versa. This convergence allows experiential marketing activations, such as mobile augmented reality (AR) configurations deployed by premium brands, to bridge the gap between abstract digital data and tangible customer value. Physical retail environments, hospitality design, and product packaging are no longer evaluated solely on their real-world utility; they are strategically optimized to act as "shareable content," ensuring that physical consumer interactions feed back into the platform's interest loop.

While the shift toward an entertainment-first ecosystem drastically reduces the traditional "barriers to entry" for emerging brands and disruptive creators, allowing a novel entity to achieve millions of organic views without a pre-existing follower network, it introduces extreme structural volatility (Kozinets, 2023). In the social graph era, organic reach was highly stable; a brand could reliably predict the percentage of its audience that would receive a broadcast message. In the algorithm-driven media ecosystem, reach has become entirely ephemeral and transaction-based. Every single content output must compete globally for immediate attention, rendering historical brand equity secondary to real-time entertainment value. This operational volatility has fundamentally altered the financial logic of influencer marketing and celebrity endorsements. While the omnipresence of media platforms has exponentially increased the reach, accessibility, and economic scale of using high-social-value public figures, it has simultaneously inflated the financial risks associated with these investments. For example, in 2018, Hopper HQ created an Instagram "Rich List of 2018" to highlight the top influencers on the social media app and how much they charge per sponsored post. It turned out that the exposure value of a single post by global icons like Selena Gomez was estimated at \$3.4 million, commanding upfront sponsored costs exceeding \$800,000 per asset (Business Insider, 2018). However, contemporary empirical marketing research warns

that these astronomical valuations can be highly speculative and detached from core business performance. Unpacking these metrics reveals a critical discrepancy: while a celebrity's massive following generates widespread impression metrics, the acquisition of surface-level engagement signals, such as a "like" or a passive view on a feed, frequently yields zero measurable impact on a consumer's deep psychological attitudes, long-term brand affinity, or actual conversion behavior. Furthermore, because algorithms prioritize active, relevant content over static follower numbers, the inflation of non-human "bot" followers and synthetic accounts across these networks severely erodes consumer trust. Brands are thus caught in a strategic paradox: they are forced to deploy significant capital to participate in high-reach influencer ecosystems, yet they must navigate an environment where surface-level visibility no longer automatically translates into authentic consumer relationships or sustainable corporate value.

1.2 The role of artificial intelligence in content curation and generative media

The transformation of the digital ecosystem is not merely characterized by a shift in platform architecture, but more fundamentally by what Davenport et al. (2020) describe as the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as the core engine of both content distribution and digital media production. As Huang and Rust (2021) demonstrate in their strategic framework, AI no longer operates as a passive, peripheral tool for data organization; instead, it acts as the primary governor of the media landscape. As argued by Gregori and Pascucci (2025), this profound integration redefines digital marketing as a primary factor of competitive advantage. In an article published by the California Management Review, Overgoor et al. (2019) argue that firms must move beyond mere participation in digital spaces. Organizations are now required to orchestrate complex data infrastructures where machine learning models dictate which messages achieve visibility.

To evaluate the operational mechanics of this technological shift, one must first unpack the role of AI in predictive content curation. In the early stages of social networks, content filtration was binary, relying on chronological feeds or explicit user commands. In the modern algorithm-driven ecosystem, however, Kozinets (2023) conceptualizes AI as an absolute gatekeeper between the brand and the consumer. Platforms deploy highly sophisticated recommendation systems driven by deep neural networks and advanced reinforcement learning models. In a fundamental research on marketing science, Chintagunta et al. (2022) illustrate that these predictive engines do not merely organize content but actively anticipate human psychological states to maximize platform engagement and user retention (dwell time). By processing trillions of behavioral data points simultaneously, including millisecond-level scrolling velocity, active engagement loops, pause intervals, and immediate skipping patterns, the AI constructs a fluid, hyper-personalized psychological profile of the individual user. This automated curatorial gatekeeping strips brands of their historical control over message delivery. A firm can no longer guarantee the distribution of its message simply by paying for platform presence or accumulating followers. Instead, the AI curation engine evaluates every single piece of content as an independent variable, measuring its real-time entertainment value against global user vectors. Consequently, corporate visibility has become entirely dependent on navigating these automated gatekeepers, and as pointed out by Davenport (2020), this automated gatekeeping transforms corporate media strategy from a traditional creative discipline into a highly technical exercise in algorithmic alignment.

While predictive curation fundamentally altered the rules of content distribution, the rise of Artificial Intelligence Generative Content (AIGC) is completely rewriting the rules of content production (Dwivedi et al., 2023). The Web 2.0 era was built on the democratization of human voice through User-Generated Content (UGC), where, as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) articulated, consumers and brands co-created the narrative fabric of the internet. The

contemporary ecosystem, however, has crossed into the era of Generative Media, where advanced large language models (LLMs), synthetic voice modulators, and generative video systems autonomously synthesize complex creative outputs.

This technological leap transforms content production from a labor-intensive human endeavor into an infinitely scalable, automated commodity. Peres et al. (2023) indicate that brands can now leverage generative engines to create hyper-customized, multi-format campaigns at a fraction of the traditional cost and time requirements. However, this capacity for infinite production introduces a critical structural paradox: when the financial and logistical barriers to content creation collapse to near zero, the digital marketplace faces unprecedented, exponential hyper-saturation. As automated systems flood media ecosystems with endless streams of synthetic assets, the traditional economic value of content production plummets. In an environment dominated by automated text, algorithmic imagery, and synthetic video, human creative outputs lose their inherent scarcity, fundamentally shifting the strategic priority of marketing from volume execution to the calculated defense of brand differentiation.

This democratization and infinite replication of content generation expose corporate strategy to what top-tier industry leaders define as a profound existential crisis. To understand this structural shift, one can look at the foundational economics of AI popularized by Agrawal et al. (2018) in their *Prediction Machines* framework. They demonstrate that when the cost of machine-driven prediction drops drastically, it triggers a rapid depreciation in the value of traditional human analytical expertise. This macroeconomic transformation is already sweeping across the world's elite knowledge industries, most notably exemplified by the structural disruption within premier global consultancies like McKinsey. Historically, premium corporate entities justified massive fees by deploying highly trained human capital to synthesize complex data, build sophisticated financial models, and craft elegant, long-term strategic recommendations.

Today, the rapid deployment of autonomous AI agents within corporate operations demonstrates that these exact intellectual outputs can be replicated by advanced algorithms in seconds, at a fraction of the cost, and with operational efficiencies that human structures cannot match (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2019). This shift signals a brutal simplification: when the analytical "dirty work" of data processing and strategic drafting becomes fully automated, traditional knowledge-based services risk being reduced to a mere commodity (Huang and Rust, 2021).

For digital brand strategy, this macroeconomic shift carries massive operational and structural implications (Davenport et al., 2020; Chintagunta et al., 2022):

- The erasure of historical audience equity: Traditional brand equity, historically accumulated via massive follower counts and historical brand loyalty, is largely bypassed by predictive models. The algorithm treats every content output as an isolated, transactional event, meaning that a newly established firm can theoretically compete for the exact same consumer attention slice as a legacy multi-billion-dollar enterprise.
- The demanded shift toward predictive agility: Marketing departments can no longer rely on rigid, semi-annual creative campaigns. Because the interest loop rewards real-time cultural relevance and immediate user engagement signals, corporate entities must develop highly flexible creative pipelines capable of producing high volumes of dynamic, algorithmically native content.
- The inversion of creative production: Historically, corporate creative teams developed a singular narrative concept and pushed it downward to a passive audience. In an AI-governed media ecosystem, creative production must be inverted; brands must analyze real-time platform data trends and deploy machine-learning tools to dynamically modify visual assets, messaging frameworks, and targeting loops to match platform demands.

- The proliferation of synthetic content homogenization: The widespread commercial democratization of generative AI models allows brands to scale copywriting, static imagery, and video generation at near-zero marginal costs. However, this creates a severe strategic hurdle, as competing brands utilizing identical algorithmic models risk falling into visual and tonal sameness, severely eroding brand differentiation in crowded markets.

Consequently, within this AI-driven media ecosystem, the parameters of competitive advantage are completely rewritten. Brands can no longer survive solely on the volume of their digital outputs or the technical perfection of their data models, instead, authenticity emerges as the single most valuable asset a firm can possess. Corporate strategy must therefore shift its ultimate focus away from mere algorithmic scaling, pivoting instead toward the preservation of transparent human validation and the cultivation of long-term customer relationships built on authentic, unautomated trust.

1.3 Social Commerce and the Compression of the Marketing Funnel

The structural and technological transformations analyzed in the previous sections, specifically the transition toward AI-driven interest graphs and the infinite scaling of generative media, do not merely alter user entertainment habits; they fundamentally reorganize the commercial infrastructure of the digital marketplace. As Lamberton and Stephen (2016) demonstrate in their longitudinal analysis of digital media development, social platforms have evolved from simple relational networks into absolute transactional environments. Pushed by the consolidation of mobile-first interfaces and real-time cloud computation, digital spaces have completed a transition where the passive hosting of consumer content has been replaced by the instant execution of commercial operations. This evolution bridges the gap between digital

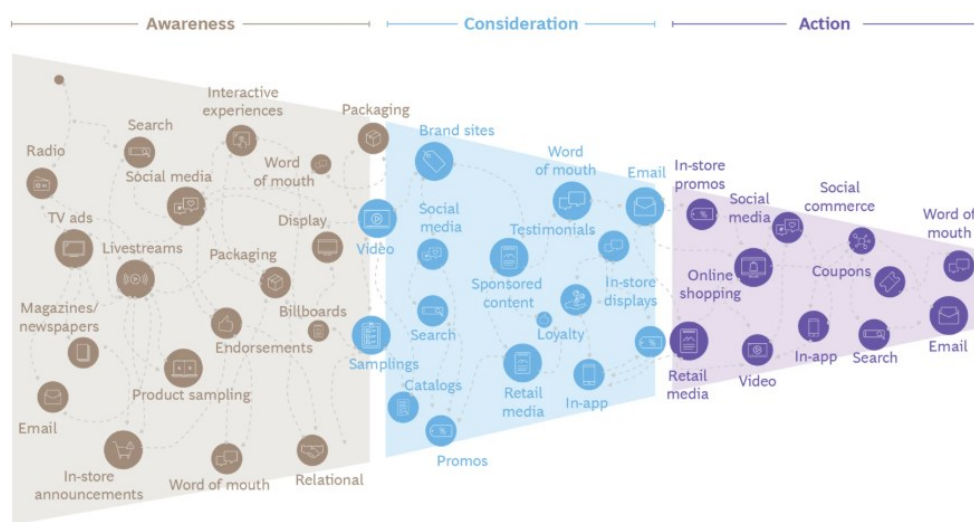
media consumption and automated retail, establishing a highly integrated paradigm where consuming media and executing an economic transaction become structurally identical events. This systemic integration of social interaction and immediate purchase behavior directly fuels the rise of Social Commerce, which Yadav et al. (2013) define as the delivery of e-commerce activities and transactions directly within the native interface of algorithm-driven social networks. To fully understand the efficacy of this environment, it is crucial to clarify the connection between algorithmic curation and Customer Experience. Within social commerce architecture, the product shown in a user's feed is never casual or serendipitous. Instead, it is the highly calculated output of predictive machine-learning models. As established by Chintagunta et al. (2022), these algorithms continuously process granular behavioral data, such as past purchase history, active dwell time on specific video categories, and micro-interactions with related influencers, to serve hyper-relevant commercial stimuli directly to a precisely targeted psychological profile.

The defining strategic consequence of this algorithmic integration is the absolute "compression of the marketing funnel." In traditional marketing theory, the consumer's path to purchase was universally conceptualized as a highly segmented, linear journey. Historically mapped via classic frameworks such as the AIDA model (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action), the consumer decision-making process traditionally required navigating massive structural friction and cognitive evaluation. Consumers would discover a brand on one medium, conduct asynchronous information searches on another, and eventually migrate to a separate storefront to execute the purchase.

In sharp contrast, the modern algorithm-driven media ecosystem triggers a total collapse of these independent chronological stages. Within a native social commerce environment, such as TikTok Shop or Instagram Checkout, the entire linear funnel is flattened into a singular, instantaneous digital event. By embedding native payment gateways within the entertainment

feed, platforms remove legacy transactional hurdles (such as external link redirection or cart registration forms). To synthesize this structural evolution, **Figure 1** illustrates the fundamental differences between the traditional decision-making journey and the modern algorithmic architecture. As analyzed by the Boston Consulting Group (2025), the traditional linear funnel artificially forced consumer touchpoints into rigid, sequential stages.

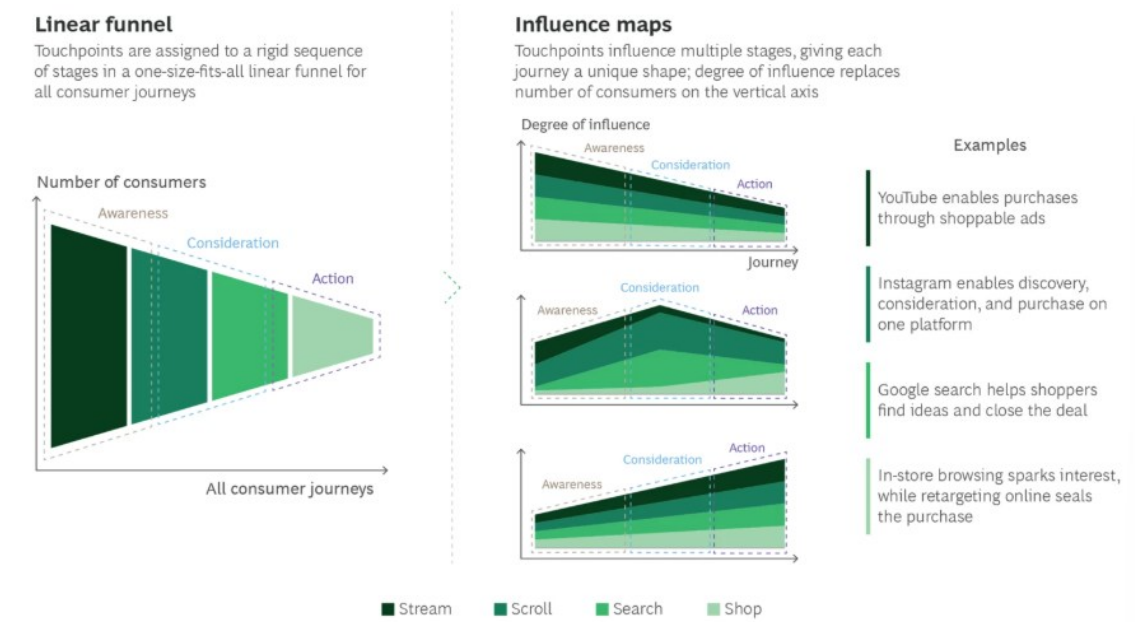
Figure 1 – The linear funnel force -fits complex customer journey



Source: *BCG Global Publications*

In the modern era of social commerce, this rigid structure is replaced by an integrated influence map (**Figure 2**). Unlike the sequential approach of the traditional funnel, the modern architecture recognizes that behaviors such as streaming, scrolling, and shopping occur simultaneously, overlapping and compressing the traditional distance between awareness and action.

Figure 2 – Influence maps enable greater flexibility



Source: *BCG Global Publications*

While this funnel compression undoubtedly improves the operational flow of the customer experience by eliminating logistical friction, it introduces a critical duality regarding consumer psychology. On one hand, the frictionless environment maximizes immediate conversion rates and delivers absolute convenience. On the other hand, as Appel et al. (2020) note when analyzing the blurring boundaries of digital commerce, this compression can simultaneously improve the depth of the customer experience. By completely bypassing the traditional "alternative evaluation" and "research" phases, the algorithmic funnel replaces rational cognitive reflection with rapid, emotionally driven impulses. The path to purchase is transformed into an effortless behavioral reflex, increasing the risk of buyer's remorse and transactional volatility. From a positioning and competitive standpoint, this structural flattening fundamentally alters how corporate enterprises must generate and defend market relevance. As established by Ferrero (2023), generating differential customer value relies on how effectively an enterprise's offer fulfills consumer needs compared to competitors. However, in an era characterized by full funnel compression, differential value is no longer generated solely by

the physical utility of a product; rather, it is actively co-created through the absolute speed and responsiveness of the digital purchasing environment. Therefore, brands are forced to pivot their operational assets away from legacy, long-tail communication campaigns, adapting instead to ensure that visual inspiration and transactional validation occur in total synchronicity. Consequently, sustainable digital brand equity relies heavily on a firm's capacity to manage this duality: eliminating transactional friction to capture impulse conversions, while simultaneously delivering enough authentic social proof to validate the consumer's high-speed decision.

CHAPTER 2

STRATEGIC MARKETING IN THE AGE OF ALGORITHMIC MEDIA

2.1 Digital marketing as a competitive factor in saturated markets

In contemporary industrial economics, market saturation has become a defining structural hurdle for global consumer brands. Within highly crowded sectors, such as the global beauty and cosmetics industry, technological parity and rapid supply chain replication have minimized the performance gaps between competing physical products. Historically, a firm could achieve a dominant market share simply by offering superior formulation, better packaging, or a lower price point. Today, these physical attributes are merely the "table stakes" required to enter the market; they are no longer sufficient to secure a sustainable competitive advantage. To escape this "commodity trap," corporate organizations must look beyond the physical boundaries of their goods. As argued by Gregori and Pascucci (2025), digital marketing has evolved from a peripheral promotional tool into the primary factor of corporate competitiveness. In a saturated environment, a firm's ultimate market value is not determined solely in the laboratory or the factory, but rather by its capacity to orchestrate digital touchpoints that capture, retain, and convert consumer attention within crowded algorithmic media ecosystems.

To theoretically ground this strategic shift, one must analyze how market hyper-saturation fundamentally redefines the mechanics of value creation. In modern, digitally saturated landscapes, consumers are exposed to an overwhelming surplus of commercial stimuli. Algorithms deliver thousands of micro-advertisements, influencer endorsements, and brand messages to a single user every day. This severe information clutter creates a high level of cognitive noise, which dilutes the impact of traditional advertising and forces consumers to deploy psychological filtering mechanisms. If a brand attempts to compete purely on product specifications (e.g., the ingredients of a foundation or the exact shade of a lipstick), it will be

immediately filtered out by the consumer's cognitive fatigue. According to the value-creation frameworks established by Ferrero (2023), generating differential customer value requires an enterprise to continuously modify how its target segments perceive its market offerings relative to competitors. When physical products look and perform similarly, this differential value must be engineered entirely through digital customer experiences.

In his foundational research on digital transformation frameworks, Gupta (2018) notes that successful enterprises must look past the physical asset to design an integrated digital layer around the product. For modern consumer brands, this engineering of differential value involves:

- The construction of immersive digital spaces: Deploying interactive tools, virtual try-ons, and automated personalization engines that lower consumer cognitive friction.
- The cultivation of decentralized brand communities: Shifting the corporate role from a unilateral broadcaster to a community facilitator, aligning the product directly with the consumer's core social identity.
- The transition from functional utility to experiential solutions: Elevating the physical item from a mere functional tool into a premium symbol of lifestyle integration.

Given the funnel compression analyzed in Chapter 1, corporate strategy must pivot from passively waiting for consumer progression to actively capturing impulse. Because inspiration and transaction now occur simultaneously within the digital feed, an enterprise's primary operational imperative is to seamlessly synchronize its messaging with algorithmic environments. For a brand to remain competitive, it must strategically orchestrate its digital touchpoints, so its content aligns perfectly with the platform's real-time predictive models. This requires what this thesis defines as the interpretative category of "contextual fluidity." A brand's content must natively match the tone, pacing, and visual language of the platform it inhabits. If a corporate message feels too polished, intrusive, or resembles a traditional

television commercial, the platform's algorithmic gatekeeper, optimizing strictly for user retention, will categorize it as low-interest and render it invisible. Effectively, if a brand fails to master this touchpoint orchestration, it is erased from the consumer's consideration set entirely, regardless of its real-world market legacy.

The strategic orchestration of digital marketing becomes exponentially more complex when an enterprise operates across dual market channels, balancing direct algorithmic sales with global retail partnerships. Modern premium brands must navigate the friction between Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) digital infrastructures and traditional Omnichannel retail networks. By synthesized analysis of the market channel mechanics established by both Gupta and Ferrero, this operational dichotomy can be broken down into two distinct, competing strategic demands:

1. The performance-driven D2C infrastructure: Powered by native integrations like TikTok Shop or Instagram Checkout, digital touchpoints must deliver immediate visual value. The strategy here is entirely performance-driven: algorithms serve a hyper-targeted video tutorial, and the user executes an impulse conversion without ever leaving the application. This model offers brands exceptionally high profit margins and absolute control over first-party consumer data.
2. The relational omnichannel retail network: Maintaining premium brand equity and global scale requires a strong physical retail presence through massive distributors (such as Sephora). These networks rely on a brand's digital marketing not just for immediate online sales, but to drive physical foot traffic and bridge the online-to-offline gap. A consumer might discover a product via an algorithmic D2C feed but prefer to test the physical shade in a physical environment before committing to brand loyalty.

Navigating this channel dichotomy is the ultimate test of digital competitiveness. If a brand pushes too hard on cheap algorithmic D2C sales, it risks cheapening its premium identity. If it relies entirely on physical retail, it loses the speed and data acquisition of the digital age.

Therefore, modern enterprises must deploy a unified strategy: using algorithms for instant D2C visibility, while using high-value digital storytelling to support and elevate their physical retail partners.

2.2 The paradox of authenticity: building brand trust in an AI driven world

As the digital ecosystem transitions from relational social graphs to predictive, algorithm-driven media architectures, corporate entities face a profound strategic dilemma: the paradox of authenticity. To theoretically analyze this paradox, it is necessary to explicitly outline the logical chain that connects technological automation to consumer perception, and ultimately, to corporate strategy. This progression can be mapped through the following sequence:

1. **Technological Level (AI Scaling):** Advanced large language models (LLMs) and synthetic imagery generators enable the infinite scaling of content creation. As noted by HubSpot and Sprout Social (2026), enterprise marketing departments rely heavily on AI to generate copy and personalize interactions, reducing production barriers to near zero.
2. **Market Level (Content Overload & Homogenization):** When competing enterprises deploy identical AI generation tools, trained on the exact same global data sets, their digital outputs mathematically converge. This triggers a "sea of sameness" and severe content overload, where brands become visually and tonally indistinguishable.
3. **Perceptual Level (Consumer Skepticism):** This absolute democratization of volume has triggered a sharp psychological counterreaction. Consumers are increasingly literate in digital mechanics; they recognize heavily processed generative code. Consequently, audience skepticism has reached historic highs, and the perception of artificiality erodes traditional digital trust.

4. Strategic Level (Need for Human Validation): When synthetic background noise becomes the default standard, human credibility ceases to be a basic operational baseline. Raw, verifiable human presence transforms into a scarce, premium market asset, establishing authenticity as the ultimate strategic differentiator.

To visualize this dynamic, Table 2.2 illustrates the friction between the operational benefits of Artificial Intelligence and the subsequent risks to brand equity, highlighting the necessary strategic responses.

Table 2.2 - The AI Authenticity Paradox: Risks and Strategic Responses

AI operational benefit	Brand equity risk	Strategic corporate response
Infinite scaling and cost-efficiency in content generation.	Content Homogenization: The brand falls into a digital commodity loop, losing its unique voice.	Establish a strong, purpose-driven brand identity that transcends visual aesthetics.
Automated personalization and hyper-targeted reach.	Consumer Skepticism: Users perceive interactions as artificial, leading to severe distrust.	Deploy transparent, un-retouched User-Generated Content (UGC) as verifiable proof.
Rapid generation of polished, mathematically perfect visual assets	Erosion of Relational Trust: Loss of the "human element" necessary for emotional resonance.	Prioritize high-friction, human-validated community interactions over automated vanity metrics.

Source: *own elaboration*

This structural erosion of consumer trust requires a radical shift in how corporate enterprises construct their relational architectures. As contemporary empirical research warns (Appel et

al., 2020; Gregori & Pascucci, 2025), relying on low-friction vanity metrics, such as an automated double-tap or a passive algorithmic view, is frequently deceptive. A user can execute these actions as an autonomic reflex without forming any psychological attachment. Instead, building consumer trust in an AI-dominated landscape requires brands to implement deep validation mechanisms. Brands must intentionally design digital touchpoints that invite genuine consumer co-creation, prioritizing sustained community conversations and authentic peer-to-peer advocacy over the passive accumulation of automated impressions.

The ultimate corporate blueprint for resolving this authenticity paradox requires a strategic foundation built on purpose-driven positioning and decentralized, un-retouched User-Generated Content (UGC). Instead of relying on heavily retouched, over-processed corporate campaigns, modern organizations must turn their customers into the primary, verifiable storytellers of the brand. This theoretical alignment between a deep corporate mission and transparent human proof is what allows modern enterprises to achieve explosive algorithmic virality while maintaining an unshakeable sense of community trust. These theoretical dynamics will be examined in Chapter 3 through the case of Fenty Beauty, which illustrates how AI-driven visibility, authenticity, and paid/earned media integration can interact in a real market context.

2.3 Pay-to-play visibility: navigating the decline of organic reach and the new advertising landscape

As the digital ecosystem has matured from open, collaborative networks into highly monetized, algorithm-driven media architectures, the fundamental economics of brand visibility have been entirely rewritten. During the early Web 2.0 era, platforms prioritized user acquisition and network growth above all else. To incentivize corporate participation, platforms freely distribute brand content to massive audiences, allowing enterprises to generate tremendous

value without direct media costs. However, as these platforms achieved global saturation, their operational focus shifted permanently toward aggressive financial monetization. This structural shift resulted in the deliberate, systemic suppression of organic (free) reach, forcing corporate enterprises into a strict "pay-to-play" paradigm. To systematically manage this landscape, modern marketing strategy relies on the integration of the Paid, Earned, and Owned Media (POEM) framework. Table 2.3 defines these three pillars within the context of the contemporary algorithmic ecosystem.

Table 2.3 - The POEM Model in Algorithmic Media

Media type	Definition	Algorithmic role and strategic value
Owned media	Digital properties explicitly controlled by the brand (e.g., official website, app, official social media profiles).	Serves as the foundational hub for brand identity and direct first-party data collection. Highly secure but suffers from algorithmically restricted organic reach.
Earned media	Organic mentions, reviews, shares, and viral UGC created voluntarily by consumers and independent creators.	Generates massive social proof and human authenticity. Highly effective at bypassing skepticism, but inherently volatile and unpredictable.
Paid media	Sponsored algorithmic placements, programmatic ads, and boosted content explicitly purchased by the brand.	Guarantees targeted visibility by bypassing the algorithmic paywall. Requires continuous capital allocation but provides predictable, scalable reach.

Source: *own generation*

Historically, a brand's follower count (Owned Media) represented a guaranteed distribution network. Today, a brand's organic post is typically shown to a fraction of its actual follower

base, often hovering below 2% to 5% of its total audience. The algorithm acts as a digital tollbooth: if a corporate entity wishes to reach the remaining 95% of its own painstakingly acquired audience, or penetrate new market segments, it must explicitly bypass the organic filter by purchasing Sponsored Placements (Paid Media). Consequently, as emphasized by Ferrero (2023), the historical strategy of simply "building a follower base" is no longer a viable standalone marketing model. Followers have been downgraded from relational assets to mere targeting parameters for paid advertising campaigns.

This structural decline in free visibility has transformed digital marketing from a creative communication exercise into a highly complex, data-driven capital allocation strategy. Brands must deploy advanced marketing tactics, such as dynamic cross-platform retargeting, programmatic bidding, and AI-optimized video placements, to secure market share against legacy competitors. The financial reality is uncompromising: if a brand pauses its paid media investments, it risks immediate digital invisibility, allowing better-funded competitors to instantly capture its market position.

However, navigating this aggressive pay-to-play landscape requires a highly sophisticated strategic synergy between Paid Media and Earned Media. As Gupta (2018) points out, relying solely on organic algorithms (Earned Media) is structurally unsustainable in the long term due to the inherent volatility and constant adjustments of predictive AI models. Conversely, relying purely on polished corporate Paid Media yields low conversion rates due to the consumer skepticism analyzed previously.

To build a sustainable digital empire, brands must integrate a relentless, hybrid framework. By utilizing authentic, highly engaging user-generated content (Earned Media) as the foundational creative assets for paid performance marketing (Paid Media), enterprises can achieve a dual theoretical victory: significantly lowering Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC), because authentic videos hold user attention much longer than traditional ads, while simultaneously

satisfying the platform's demand for paid monetization. This hybrid approach represents the relevant strategic model for navigating the modern, hyper-saturated digital economy. These theoretical dynamics will be examined in Chapter 3 through the case of Fenty Beauty, which illustrates how AI-driven visibility, authenticity, and paid/earned media integration can interact in a real market context.

CHAPTER 3

FENTY BEAUTY CASE STUDY

3.1 Market disruption in a saturated industry: The "beauty for all" positioning

As established in Chapter 2, modern corporate enterprises operating in hyper-saturated sectors face the critical challenge of the "commodity trap." In the global cosmetics and beauty industry, technological parity in product formulation has historically made it incredibly difficult for a new brand to secure a sustainable competitive advantage purely through physical product attributes. Decades ago, Charles Revson, the founder of Revlon, famously encapsulated the core mechanics of beauty marketing by stating: *"In the factory we make cosmetics; in the store we sell hope"*. While this historical axiom successfully defined the traditional retail era, the modern algorithmic ecosystem demands a much deeper psychological alignment. To escape contemporary market saturation, selling the mere "hope" of an idealized aesthetic is no longer sufficient; a brand must generate differential customer value that transcends the physical item and deeply aligns with the consumer's core social identity. The launch and subsequent global dominance of Fenty Beauty provides the definitive empirical application of this theoretical framework.

Launched in September 2017 as a joint venture between Robyn Rihanna Fenty and LVMH's Kendo Brands incubator, Fenty Beauty entered one of the most crowded and fiercely competitive markets in the global economy. At the time of its launch, the legacy beauty industry was characterized by rigid, standardized product offerings. Traditional conglomerates predominantly catered to a narrow demographic, frequently ignoring the diverse complexion needs of women of color. According to the Harvard Business School case study on the brand (Ofek & Alzahawi, 2021), women with very light or very dark skin tones historically faced a "void" in the market, forced to mix multiple products to achieve a basic foundation match.

Fenty Beauty weaponized this market gap to engineer unprecedented differential value. Instead of competing on minor incremental improvements to formulation or packaging, the brand completely disrupted the market by introducing a revolutionary, purpose-driven positioning strategy: "Beauty for All." Fenty launched its flagship *Pro Filt'r Soft Matte Longwear Foundation* with an unprecedented 40 distinct shades (later expanded to over 50), specifically engineered to cater to the historically marginalized extremes of the human complexion spectrum. Strategically, the 40-shade range was not merely a physical product expansion; it was a masterclass in the transition from functional utility to an experiential, community-driven solution. Fenty Beauty did not just sell a foundation; it sold social validation and inclusivity. By acknowledging and serving demographics that legacy brands had systematically ignored, Fenty instantly cultivated a fiercely loyal, decentralized brand community.

Fenty successfully modified how its target segments perceived its market offering relative to legacy competitors. While traditional brands were trapped competing on functional product specifications, Fenty elevated its physical asset into a premium symbol of inclusive lifestyle integration. This allowed the brand to shatter the cognitive noise of the saturated beauty market, generating an estimated \$100 million in sales within its first 40 days of operation (Ofek & Alzahawi, 2021) and forcing the entire global beauty industry to re-evaluate its standardized manufacturing practices, a phenomenon that the market later labeled "The Fenty Effect."

By grounding its digital presence in an undeniable physical truth (a genuinely inclusive product line), Fenty Beauty successfully bypassed the consumer cognitive fatigue that filters out traditional corporate advertising, setting the perfect stage for its highly authentic algorithmic media strategy.

3.2 Analysis of content execution and AI integration

Fenty Beauty's operational success is fundamentally rooted in how it resolved the "authenticity paradox (cf. Chapter 2)". In a digital landscape increasingly saturated with mathematically perfect, AI-generated synthetic media, consumer skepticism has reached historic highs. Fenty Beauty circumvented this digital commodity loop not by rejecting technology, but by masterfully orchestrating its content execution to prioritize human validation while leveraging predictive AI algorithms strictly for distribution.

Traditional beauty conglomerates historically relied on highly polished, heavily retouched studio campaigns featuring unattainable aesthetic standards. Fenty Beauty actively dismantled this approach. The brand's content execution strategy was designed to ensure that its marketing assets naturally matched the native language of social platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

Instead of broadcasting top-down corporate messages, Fenty utilized decentralized, un-retouched User-Generated Content (UGC). The brand's digital feeds were immediately populated with real-time product reviews, raw makeup tutorials, and shade-matching videos created by everyday consumers and micro-influencers of all skin tones. By pairing the highly authentic personal voice of its founder, Rihanna, with the diverse faces of its actual community, Fenty effectively turned its customers into the primary, verifiable storytellers of the brand. This raw content execution provided the deep "human validation" required to cut through the cognitive noise of a highly automated digital environment, neutralizing the skepticism associated with heavily processed corporate advertising.

While Fenty's creative execution relied on raw human authenticity, its distribution strategy relied on highly sophisticated algorithmic and AI integration. The brand provided a textbook application of the Paid, Earned, and Owned Media (POEM) synergy (represented in graph 3.2) discussed in Chapter 2.3.

Graph 3.2 – Fenty Beauty ‘s POEM Algorithmic Synergy



Source: *own generation*

When Fenty launched, its inclusive "Beauty for All" message generated massive organic virality (Earned Media). However, recognizing that relying solely on volatile algorithmic organic reach is structurally unsustainable, Fenty integrated a relentless predictive AI strategy to scale its operations. Rather than using generative AI to create synthetic visual assets, Fenty leveraged machine-learning algorithms on platforms like Meta and TikTok to hyper-target its authentic UGC. The brand utilized its most engaging organic consumer videos as the foundational creative assets for programmatic Paid Media. By feeding raw, highly authentic content into the platforms' predictive recommendation models, Fenty Beauty achieved a dual strategic victory: The brand explicitly bypassed the organic algorithmic paywall, ensuring its content reached highly specific, underserved market segments identified by the platform's AI targeting capabilities.

By perfectly matching the visual language of the algorithmic feed, Fenty seamlessly integrated native e-commerce tools (such as Instagram Checkout) directly into its UGC videos. This allowed the brand to compress the traditional marketing funnel, transforming passive scrolling directly into instantaneous, frictionless conversions. Through this strategic architecture, Fenty Beauty demonstrated how modern enterprises must integrate AI: not as a substitute for human creativity, but as a hyper-efficient distribution engine that scales authentic human connections.

3.3 Strategic outcomes: loyalty, engagement and long-term value

The ultimate test of any digital marketing strategy in an algorithmic ecosystem is not the ability to generate a temporary viral launch, but the capacity to sustain long-term digital brand equity. As analyzed in Chapter 2, many contemporary brands fall into the trap of optimizing short-term vanity metrics, passively collecting low-friction algorithmic views that fail to translate into sustainable financial performance. Fenty Beauty's strategic outcomes sharply contrast with this trend, demonstrating how transparent content execution and purpose-driven positioning convert algorithmic visibility into deep relational loyalty and long-term market value.

Fenty Beauty successfully bypassed the "deception of low-friction signals." Instead of simply pushing users to passively "like" a polished corporate image, the brand's strategy naturally incentivized high-friction interactions. By launching a product that deeply impacted users' personal identities (finally providing foundation matches for historically excluded demographics), Fenty inspired its audience to invest significant time and effort into the brand. Consumers voluntarily filmed detailed review videos, participated in sustained community conversations, and passionately defended the brand across digital platforms (Riley & Dorbu, 2025). However, this engagement transcended standard commercial metrics. Recent empirical research (Hagan, 2024) analyzing Fenty's consumer-level impact demonstrates that the brand

generated "significant empowerment," particularly among young Black women who had been historically overlooked by legacy conglomerates. By actively combating industry-wide "colorism", the systemic bias that traditionally privileged lighter skin tones over darker counterparts, Fenty fostered a profound sense of social validation. This organic community mobilization generated staggering, quantifiable financial value. As highlighted by Miller (2022) in her analysis of the brand's launch mechanics, Fenty Beauty generated an estimated \$72 million in *Earned Media Value* (EMV) in just its first month of operation. This massive volume of free, highly authentic digital PR allowed the brand to instantly compete with, and surpass, legacy cosmetics giants without outspending them on traditional advertising. Fenty did not just acquire customers; it facilitated community co-creation, securing an emotional attachment that insulated the brand from the transactional volatility typically associated with compressed social commerce funnels.

Beyond immediate algorithmic engagement, Fenty Beauty's long-term value stems from a fundamental disruption of corporate positioning. Historically, traditional luxury cosmetics brands operating under major conglomerates relied heavily on the concepts of exclusion and hierarchy to signal premium value. As Miller (2022) notes, legacy luxury brands manufactured prestige by keeping products physically scarce and marketing them to a narrow, homogenous demographic. Fenty Beauty, operating under the LVMH luxury conglomerate, completely shattered this paradigm. The strategic outcome of the "Beauty for All" campaign was the creation of a completely new category: a luxury brand that is explicitly exempt from exclusion. Fenty proved that an enterprise could maintain a highly premium market positioning, command premium pricing, and leverage the high-quality supply chain of LVMH, while remaining radically inclusive. By doing so, Fenty Beauty transitioned from a "market-driven" company (one that simply reacts to consumer trends) into a "market-driver", utilizing disruptive

innovation to set a new global benchmark that forced incumbent competitors to completely alter their own manufacturing and marketing strategies (Miller, 2022).

Finally, Fenty Beauty's long-term value generation serves as the definitive application of navigating the market channel dichotomy discussed in Chapter 2.1. While Fenty mastered the Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) algorithmic infrastructure to drive massive impulse awareness, it did not isolate itself online. Instead, it perfectly orchestrated its digital touchpoints to elevate its omnichannel retail network, specifically through its exclusive global partnership with Sephora. Fenty recognized that while the algorithmic feed compresses the inspiration and awareness phases, premium cosmetic consumers often still require physical evaluation to solidify trust, especially when finding a precise foundation match among 40 different shades. Fenty weaponized its digital virality to drive massive physical foot traffic into Sephora stores. Users would discover the product via a hyper-targeted UGC video on their feed, and then execute the final, high-value transaction in a physical retail environment where they could interact with the brand.

Ultimately, the strategic outcomes of Fenty Beauty validate the core theoretical framework of this thesis. In a digitally saturated market governed by predictive algorithms, sustainable competitiveness cannot be achieved through mere technological optimization. Long-term value is generated only when an enterprise combines a fundamentally superior, purpose-driven physical product with transparent human validation, orchestrating these assets seamlessly across both algorithmic media and physical retail environments. Fenty Beauty's sustained global dominance proves that while algorithms control the distribution of attention, inclusive positioning and raw human authenticity remain the ultimate drivers of corporate value.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this thesis was to analyze the intersection between algorithmic media infrastructures, market saturation, and modern corporate marketing strategy. The findings clearly indicate that the contemporary digital landscape requires a fundamental paradigm shift in how enterprises generate and distribute value.

As established throughout the research, the integration of AI and predictive algorithms into social platforms has permanently altered consumer behavior. The traditional linear marketing funnel has collapsed into a compressed, instantaneous influence map. While algorithms possess the unprecedented ability to hyper-target consumers and remove transactional friction, they also generate a critical vulnerability: content homogenization. As brands increasingly rely on generative AI to scale their digital outputs, they risk falling into a "sea of sameness" that triggers intense consumer skepticism and erodes relational trust.

The strategic resolution to this digital paradox is not to out-compute the algorithm, but to out-humanize the competition. The empirical analysis of the Fenty Beauty case study serves as the definitive proof of this concept. Fenty Beauty did not disrupt the global cosmetics industry by utilizing highly polished, synthetic advertising. Instead, it achieved long-term market dominance by weaponizing physical inclusivity and translating that purpose-driven mission into raw, un-retouched UGC. By prioritizing sociological empowerment and authentic human validation over superficial vanity metrics, Fenty cultivated a decentralized community that fiercely defended the brand.

Crucially, Fenty's success highlights the required synergy of the modern POEM model. The brand utilized authentic Earned Media to establish credibility and overcome digital skepticism, while simultaneously deploying capital into Paid Media algorithms to scale that authenticity past the platforms' restricted organic reach. Furthermore, by seamlessly linking its digital D2C

virality with Sephora's physical retail environment, Fenty mastered the omnichannel dichotomy.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that in a hyper-saturated market governed by artificial intelligence, technology must be utilized strictly as a distribution engine, not as a substitute for human connection. Sustainable corporate value is generated only when an enterprise grounds its digital strategy in a fundamentally superior, genuinely inclusive physical product, and relies on transparent, community-driven storytelling to capture the algorithm's attention.

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