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It's all about marketing! Exploring the social perception in the Italian context

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Abstract

This research discusses the social perception of marketing in the Italian context. The authors conducted a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of Facebook statuses. From data analysis emerged that marketing receives any kind of public criticism. The most evident accusation regards the adoption of misleading actions, manipulation, and pervasiveness. The study also reveals an accentuated confusion about what marketing really is as a discipline and in practice. Non-marketing people tend to depict marketing as the art of selling stuff. This negative view contrasts with the image that academic community and Organisations, such as the American Marketing Associations, wish to convey about marketing discipline.

Keywords Marketing identity · Perception of marketing · Criticisms of marketing · Marketing definition · Marketing meaning · Marketing concept

1 Introduction

From an academic standpoint, marketing's central function is to identify and satisfy people's myriad wants and needs, thus improving the quality of life and increasing social welfare (Kotler and Keller 2009; Wilkie and Moore 1999). Specifically, Kotler et al. (2008, p. 7) define marketing as "the process by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture value from customers in return".

According to the latest *American Marketing Association* (AMA) definition approved in July 2013, marketing is not focused only on the creation of market offerings that have value for the firm and customers, but it contributes to the society's

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welfare as well. Marketing, in fact, is described as "[…] the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for consumers, clients, partners, and society at large".

Gundlach and Wilkie (2009) argue that marketing goes beyond firms. Non-marketing actors (i.e., non-profit institutions, school, church, government, politician, persons or consumers) engage in marketing practices and activities too. For example, adding "clients" to the AMA definition of marketing acknowledges that non-profit institutions use marketing and do not see themselves as having "customers", but "clients" (Gundlach and Wilkie 2009, p. 261). Additionally, putting the expression "society at large" in the definition highlights that marketing can play a positive transformative role in the society, that is, as suggested by Kotler (2011) adopting sustainable business models.

As highlighted by Kachersky and Lerman (2013), despite this history of apparently good intentions, marketing has had a similarly long history of criticism and public accusation. Started with the publication of Vance Packard's (1957) *The Hidden Persuaders* in 1957, criticism of marketing has continued to proliferate over time. For example, the journalist and activist Naomi Klein (2000) in *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* starts a genuine anti-brand campaign, because multinational companies focus principally on financial self-interest in business. Specifically, she emphasizes the nexus of cool brands like Nike and sweatshop labor. Other scholars highlight that marketing is condemned to manipulate people (Heath and Heath 2008), and promote materialistic models capable of both reducing social well-being (Shrum et al. 2014; Marino 2016), and causing environmental damage due to the considerable number of packaging (Varey 2010). Additionally, marketing is believed to provide biased information regarding brands, and to produce advertisements that negatively shape the cultural values of a society (Wilkie and Moore 1999; Tiggemann and McGill 2004).

It is also important to note that consumers are undermining marketing's credibility and effectiveness by adopting different forms of resistance in the everyday market (Holt 2002; Heath et al. 2017). Phenomena such as boycotts (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Romani et al. 2015), anti-consumption practices (Cherrier 2009), anti-branding websites (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009), anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2010), collaborative brand attacks and "social media firestorms" (Pfeffer et al. 2014; Rauschnabel et al. 2016; Hansen et al. 2018) are not always evident, nevertheless, they represent a challenge for marketing theory and a menace for the reputation of marketing professionals.

Despite the debate on how marketing is perceived in societies is attracting huge public and industry attention, there is still little academic research devoted to analysing this topic. Hence, the aim of the present research is two-fold. Firstly, it attempts to identify and describe the main studies that explored common people's perceptions and attitudes towards marketing. Secondly, it purports to enhance our knowledge boundaries of marketing's role and practices in social life by investigating Italian public opinion. Specifically, focusing on the analysis of Facebook statuses, we seek to gain insights about the terminology used by Italian users to depict marketing discipline. We chose Facebook because it is by far the most popular social media. Moreover, its population is culturally and demographically more variegated

in respect both to Twitter, which is largely preferred by higher educated people, and to Instagram, which is largely used by narcissists (Paramboukis et al. 2016; Sheldon and Bryant 2016) and influencers (Casaló et al. 2018) who share photos and videos.

We believe that a reflection on consumers' views of marketing in Italy has become indispensable for several reasons. Firstly, social media research concerning the perception of marketing from the perspective of Italian consumers has never been done before. Secondly, Italian marketing has an identity problem because the evolution of marketing theory and practices in this country has gone at a slow pace due to the peculiarity of the national industrial system made up predominantly of Small and Medium-sized family-owned Enterprises. Furthermore, the diffusion of marketing as a discipline in the Italian Educational system is controversial, because handbooks of marketing mostly replicate managerial models developed in the United States that do not properly reflect the reality (Varaldo et al. 2006). Thirdly, despite the efforts produced by Italian entrepreneurs to adopt green marketing strategies (Canavari and Coderoni 2019) public opinion in Italy continues to speak poorly of marketing. Specifically, individuals highlight on one hand the incapacity of marketing to create value for consumers, and on the other hand the attitude of marketing to persuade people to buy. Besides, when frauds against consumers and corporate scandals happen the responsibility is always attributed to marketing strategies and tactics. Fourthly, at the light of recent online anti-brand phenomena investigated by D'Arco and Marino (2018), Italian consumers are becoming even more cynical about marketing practitioners and severe towards those brands and companies that present symbolic or ideological incongruity with consumer's self-concept.

Based on these premises, the rest of the paper is organised as follows. We begin with an overview of the literature concerning the negative social perception towards marketing. We then provide a description of the method used for data collection and analysis. Thereafter, we report our main findings and provide a discussion of theoretical and practical implications, limitations of the research as well as directions for future research.

2 Literature review

Very little empirical studies have investigated the general population opinion regarding the discipline of marketing (see Table 1). Sheth et al. (2006), in their study based on a convenience sample of 973 MBA students, showed that 65% of respondents displayed a negative attitude towards marketing, 27% were neutral, and only 8% were positive. Specifically, the survey revealed that in the majority of cases marketing was associated with negative words, such as "lies", "deception", "deceitful", "annoying", and "manipulating". On the contrary, the main positive terms used to depict marketing were "creativity", "fun", "humorous advertising", and "attractive people". The research also highlighted that marketers, compared to other professionals, enjoy an average reputation with a mean rating of 2.74 on a 5-point scale. However, not all marketing professionals were perceived in the same way. For example, salespeople received a rating of 2.41, just below lawyers rated at 2.56. In contrast, accountants and advertising professionals were rated at 3.22 and 2.98, respectively.

Table 1 Non-marketing people's opinions about marketing

Authors	Context	Year	Methods	Sample	Findings
Sheth et al.	USA	2006	Online survey	973 MBA students	65% of 973 respondents displayed a negative attitude towards marketing
Heath and Heath	Portugal	2008	In-depth interviews	29 consumers, having a non-marketing background	Marketing is manipulative and Misleading
Dalsace and Markovitch	USA	2009	Longitudinal content analysis	1987, 1997, 2007 samples yield respectively: 869, 901 and 863 articles	Marketing is depicted as "aggressive", "manipulative" and "misleading"
Heath and Chatzidakis	Portugal	2012	Face-to-face, Semi-structured interviews	36 consumers, having non-marketing background	Marketing is manipulative, affects consumer sovereignty and does not contribute much to social welfare
Yu	USA	2012	Surveys	318 mothers	Marketing practices affect child health and are harmful for society
Kachersky and Lerman	USA	2013	Experimental, sentence completion	625 respondents to sentence completion tasks, and 160 participants to the experiment	Marketing is good for businesses but bad for consumers
Cluley	UK	2016	Cultivation analysis	6877 documents drawn from three national newspapers	Marketing is typically presented as a cost to businesses that helps them to sell their goods and services
Kashif et al.	Pakistan	2018	In-depth semi-structured interviews	40 professionals with diverse non-marketing backgrounds	Respondents view marketing as misleading, adding costs to commodities, using unfair means to convince children and older people, and adding frustration among the members of society

Heath and Heath ([2008]) explored consumer perception towards marketing in Portugal. Based on 29 in-depth interviews they found evidence suggesting the prevalence of negative attitudes towards marketing. Especially, some participants accused marketing to be manipulative and dishonest.

Dalsace and Markovitch ([2009]) conducted a longitudinal content analysis of the general and business press to assess marketing's image at three points in time, in 1987, 1997 and 2007. They found out that the US public is taking an increasingly negative view of marketing. Specifically, marketing is most commonly depicted as "aggressive", "manipulative" and "misleading".

Heath and Chatzidakis ([2012]) planned research to demonstrate the social and transformative role of marketing. Contrarily, from the analysis of 36 semi-structured interviews emerged that consumers typically perceive marketing as having a traditional short-term, transactional, and "company-focused" orientation rather than a transformative one. Moreover, most participants identified marketing with advertising. In particular, as stated by Heat and Chatzidakis ([2012], p. 285), "The opinion that marketing was about 'persuading', 'convincing', or 'leading' consumers to do something (usually to buy) in the interest of the company was expressed spontaneously by almost all participants, indicating the prevalence of a manipulation-oriented view of marketing".

Yu ([2012]) investigated the opinions of mothers who have at least one child between the ages of 7 and 12 in terms of the impact of TV food advertising on their children. The results revealed that most mothers highlighted there are too many food ads on TV that encourage unhealthy eating habits in their children and cause parents to buy unnecessary food products. Thus, this study reinforces the idea regarding marketing manipulation and its aggressive tactics.

Kachersky and Lerman ([2013]) explored consumer perceptions of marketing via a simple sentence completion task and an experiment. Based on free responses to "marketing is […]", they discovered that US consumers generally see marketing as something that is bad for them, but good for businesses. However, the experiment revealed that this asymmetry disappears when marketer performance is communicated with a consumer orientation.

Cluley ([2016]), to understand how marketing practice and practitioners are depicted in the mass media, analysed 6877 news reports that discuss marketing across two one-year time periods from three UK newspapers. The content analysis showed that marketing is rarely discussed in accordance with the definitions of marketing set out by Organisations, such as the *Chartered Institute of Marketing* (CIM) or the *American Marketing Association* (AMA). The term "marketing" is typically used to refer to sales and advertising practices and is less considered as an activity that identifies and satisfies customer needs.

All these studies have been conducted in the Western context. Hence, in order to ascertain whether differences between East and West exist in terms of perception of marketing, Kashif et al. ([2018]) decided to investigate what consumers in a developing country, such as Pakistan, think about marketing practices. Results revealed that marketing is perceived as a profit-making activity synonymous with brands, selling efforts, and advertising. Moreover, respondents described certain marketing practices as unfair, unethical, and manipulative. Specifically, they emphasised

that marketing manipulates Pakistani people using campaigns with surreal images and expert testimonials who push people to buy and consume unwanted goods and services.

As emerged from the analysis of the existing literature, in both Eastern and Western societies, marketing is suffering an image problem. The word marketing often co-occurs with negative adjectives such as "deceitful", "annoying", "manipulative", "unfair", and "unethical", or it is considered a synonymous with "advertising", and "sale".

In light of this fact, we believe that a reflection on marketing social perception in Italy could represent an interesting investigation topic because this kind of research has never been done before. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to answer the following research question:

RQ: How is marketing depicted by Italian individuals?

To answer this question, this study proposes both a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of Facebook statuses containing the word "marketing".

3 Method

3.1 Research design

At present, social media data has become the largest and most dynamic source of information about human behaviour for researchers from a variety of disciplines (Wilson et al. 2012; Troussas et al. 2013; Spiro 2016). For example, web scraping and data analysis represent for marketing scientists and business experts an opportunity to understand individuals, groups, and society. People, in fact, use social media to socialize and talk about different topics with their peers, such as brand preferences, purchasing behaviour, sentiments and life in general.

Given the fact that the use of consumer-generated content (CGC) is widely considered as appropriate in marketing research, this study adopted this secondary data to run the analysis.

Following the guidelines suggested in Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), this research employed a data-transformation variant of the convergent parallel mixed method research. This method involves the sequential implementation of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis within a single study. Specifically, the authors performed separately on the same text corpus of CGC a qualitative content analysis in which data are presented in words and themes due to draw some interpretation of the results, and quantitative content analysis in the form of co-occurrence analysis of words. Then, the integration was achieved by reporting results together in the conclusion section. We preferred a mixed method to view the problem from multiple perspectives, to contextualize information, and also to compare, validate, or triangulate results. Data transformation, in fact, allows for the qualitative data to be quantified and the quantitative data to be emphasized in the analysis and results (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011), this operation was necessary to best interpret the findings related to how consumers perceive marketing.

3.2 Data collection

To export CGC from Facebook, we followed a retrospective automatic technique (Villegas 2016) using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, and its extraction tool NCapture. The whole process can be summarized as follows: Firstly, we selected the source type, that is, the stream of results obtained introducing the keyword "marketing" in the Facebook search bar. Secondly, we clicked the NCapture button at the top of the Google Chrome browser and started the process of data extraction. Thirdly, we imported the NCapture file, containing the posts determined by Facebook on the base of posts available and privacy settings of the posting user, into NVivo. Fourthly, using NVivo we cleaned up our initial dataset of 1237 posts (see Table 2) by removing statuses published in languages other than Italian, and contents shared by marketing people, marketing pages/groups, and practitioners. Thus, we took into consideration only data published by non-marketing people in the period January 1, 2017, to July 31, 2018. Finally, we exported the cleaned dataset consisting of 474 Facebook statuses into an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis.

4 Results

4.1 Qualitative content analysis

To explore the cleaned dataset consisting of 474 Facebook statuses we employed qualitative content analysis. This means that the dataset, composed of textual materials, was initially investigated by adopting an "interpretativist" perspective rather than an "objectivist" orientation typical of quantitative analysis (Oleinik 2011, p. 860).

Categories were derived using an inductive approach (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). Thus, in a first phase, each member of the team of research proceeded with the reading of the 474 Facebook statuses individually by adopting an open coding, that is, notes and headings are written in the text while reading it (Elo and Kyngäs 2008, pp. 109–111). In a second phase, researchers confronted each other categories until a perfect consensus was reached. Finally, the list of categories was abstracted into two main themes: "Social criticisms of marketing practices" and "Misleading marketing

Table 2 Distribution of contents by type

Type of contents	Number of statuses
Facebook statuses published in languages other than Italian	436
Facebook statuses shared by marketing people, marketing pages/groups, and practitioners	327
Facebook statuses shared by Italian non-marketing people selected for further analysis	474

definitions". These themes and associated categories are summarized in Table 3 and described in detail below.

Speaking of the first theme emerges that marketing received any kind of public criticism. The most evident accusation regards marketing manipulation. Facebook users shared posts in which marketing is depicted as a set of practices, strategies, tactics, and tricks used to manipulate people's consciousness in order to convince them to buy something or to adhere to some ideas, for example in a political scenario. Specifically, they used expressions such as:

> Marketing is everywhere… and influence your thinking… [Female; February 14, 2017]
> Thanks to some marketing genius, we are buying stuff we do not really need. Every day, brands use marketing to manipulate our minds, and it seems we do not care. [Male; April 21, 2018]
> Politics is a bad story of marketing and manipulation. Politicians utilize marketing techniques and social media to show us that everything is ok, that our country is not near bankruptcy. [Male; July 12, 2018]

Facebook users also highlighted that marketing manipulation is a direct consequence of marketing campaigns and advertising, as illustrated below:

> I must confess that sometimes, at the supermarket, I buy junk food because all those stupid TV Commercials come to my mind. [Female; October 11, 2017]
> Marketing is diabolic because it is capable to shape consumer wants and needs through clever advertising campaigns. [Male; May 23, 2018]

Furthermore, marketing affects especially people who are not informed, not educated, and show psychological or emotional weakness, as in the following:

> Marketing constantly manipulates us because we are mentally lazy, and we ignore what is happening around us. [Female; February 26, 2018]
> All those stupid people with lack of affection represent the perfect target of marketing and advertising. [Man; May 17, 2018]

Table 3 Themes and categories emerging from content analysis of Facebook statuses (number of posts = 474)

Themes	Categories
1. Social criticisms of marketing practices	1.1 Manipulation in marketing
	1.2 Marketing is misleading
	1.3 Pervasiveness and aggressiveness of marketing practices
	1.4 Marketing encourages materialism
	1.5 Marketing influences consumer conformity
	1.6 Marketing promotes an idea of society based on appearance
2. Misleading marketing definitions	2.1 Marketing is the same as selling
	2.2 Marketing is the same as advertising
	2.3 Marketing is the same as promotion

Another recurring criticism of marketing regards its unfair, misleading, or dishonest conduct. For example, marketing makes people believe in an idea of the product that does not reflect reality. Several Facebook users in their status gave detailed descriptions of experiences in which they felt misled or deceived by marketing, as in the following transcription:

> I bought [name of the brand] Croissant, and I'm just disappointed because there is a big difference between how the product is in reality and the way it is represented in television adverts or portrayed on the packaging. Why do brands continue to adopt such misleading marketing strategies? [Female; October 11, 2017]

Marketing was further criticized to be ubiquitous, pervasive, and aggressive, especially online, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> Hundreds of ads every day bombard us. Emails, telephone calls, online banners… I wish I could turn off everything and enjoy the silence for a while. [Male; January 16, 2018]
>
> Online marketing is too much aggressive… marketing techniques, such as auto-play video with sound, popups, and large sticky banners, are hard to ignore. [Male, November 21, 2017]

Finally, Facebook users accused marketing to promote materialism, conformity, and appearance culture, as illustrated below:

> I hate marketing because it promotes materialism and creates artificial needs by adopting specific communication strategies. [Female; June 1, 2018]
>
> Marketing pushes the young generation to conform. They all dress alike, listen to the same shitty pop music, and say the same things. [Male; August 11, 2018]
>
> Thanks to marketing and advertising, we live in a society where the way we dress is more important of what we really are. [Female; March 15, 2017]

The second theme regards the "Misleading marketing definitions". The content analysis revealed that common people have imprecise and partial knowledge of marketing as discipline and practice. Specifically, too many people believe that marketing is just a set of strategies that help companies to sell their products or services, as shown in the following Facebook statuses:

> I believe that marketing is sales and promotion… it has been invented to help companies to sell their product easier and faster. [Male; April 17, 2018]
>
> Marketing is the art of selling… it deals with door-to-door salespeople, call center, e-mail spam, online banners… [Female; July 23, 2017]

The word "marketing" is also used as synonymous of communication, advertising, and promotion, as illustrated below:

> Marketing is principally about communication. Companies create a specific product and then they talk to the people of its existence. [Male; September 4, 2017]

> Marketing and advertising are the same things: their primary goal is to influence consumer buying behaviour by promoting a product, service or company. [Male; October 7, 2017]

Analyzing the sentiment of the 474 Facebook statuses the results reveal that positive sentiment surroundings marketing is very rare (see Fig. 1). Only three statuses turned out to contain a positive perception of marketing discipline. Specifically, two statuses highlighted that the positive dimension of marketing regards the fact that this discipline helps companies to make a profit and survive, such as in the excerpt below:

> Marketing is a positive discipline that helps companies to make a profit and survive. [Male; May 23, 2018]

Another status instead focused on the capacity of marketing to communicate and promote social messages, such as ending violence against women, as illustrated below:

> Sometimes marketing communication is capable to produce strategies that can be helpful to contrast domestic violence and violence against women. [Female; March 8, 2018]

4.2 Quantitative content analysis

Once we concluded the qualitative content analysis, we performed on the same dataset a quantitative content analysis. The collected 474 Facebook statuses were transferred into WordStat, a quantitative content analysis and text mining software, produced by Provalis Research, which analyses the frequency and proximity of keywords and phrases. This software was used to perform an n- and k-gram analysis (Jurafsky and Martin 2008; Zappavigna 2012) for the keyword "marketing". In the fields of computational linguistics and probability, an n-gram is commonly used to search the most popular words that follow a keyword (n) in a specific context. For example, an $n + 3$ analysis would look for the most common three-word sequences starting with a keyword. On the contrary, a k-gram analysis involves computing the most popular words that precede a keyword (k). For example, a k-3 analysis would look for the most common three-word sequences preceding a keyword.
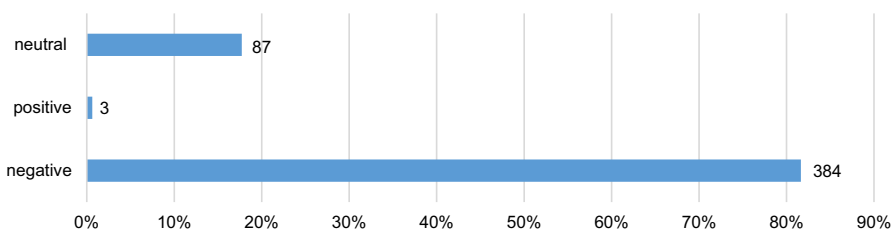

Fig. 1 Sentiment analysis of Facebook statuses with regard to the word "marketing"

Between Italian and English there are some linguistic differences (i.e., adjective position). In order to respect the syntactic structure of the Italian language, we did not translate the Facebook statuses into English. Therefore, the *n*- and *k*-gram analysis for the keyword "marketing" was performed on the Italian textual materials. Then, the most common terms distributed around the word "marketing" were translated into English.

Looking at the results of the *n*- and *k*-gram analysis (see Fig. 2), it is clear that marketing is largely associated to terms which in the Italian lexicon have a negative connotation, such as "misleading", "to manipulate", "aggressive", "hustle", "deceptive", and "diabolic". Other frequent terms that co-occur with the keyword "marketing" are "strategy", "expedient", "techniques", "operations", and "reasons". This means that marketing is perceived as a tool, an art, or a set of knowledge used by companies, brands, and political parties to achieve specific goals that have a dangerous side for common people and potential consumers. Furthermore, the word "marketing" is employed to label a speculative action or a mere façade. In some circumstances, this word couples with terms such as "communication", "campaign", "advertising", "slogan", and indicates sales-oriented activities, or deceptive practices used in the political sphere. Other lesser terms are shown in Fig. 3.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The main objective of this study was to investigate how non-marketing people perceive marketing as discipline and practice. Based on existing literature marketing has been usually found to be criticized by consumers and other social actors, both in specific Western countries (i.e., USA, UK, Portugal), and some developing areas of the Eastern world (i.e., Pakistan). The results of our research, focused on another specific socio-cultural context, the Italian one, confirm this societal tendency to
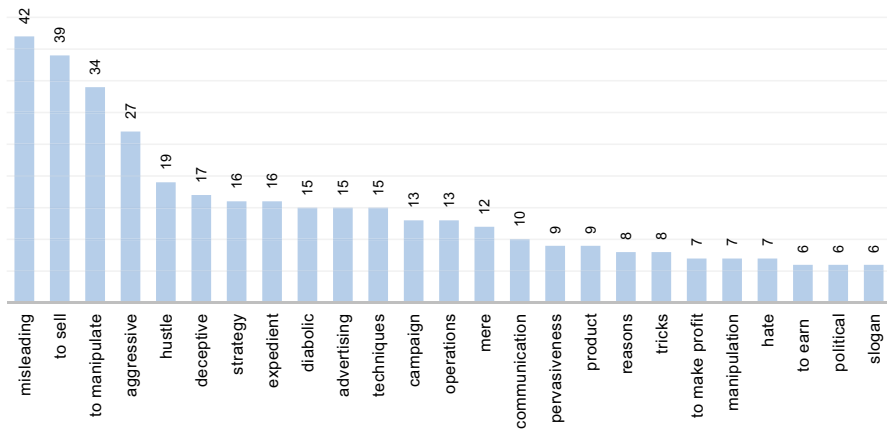

Fig. 2 Top 25 of the terms that co-occur with the keyword "marketing"

Fig. 3 Wordcloud related to the word "marketing"

believe that marketing is all about generating profits for companies and brands, that it is the main cause of materialistic consumption and social decay.

Between quantitative and qualitative content analysis there is congruence. Quantitative content analysis revealed that, cutting words such as articles or conjunctions, the probability to find terms with a negative connotation on the left or on the right of the keyword "marketing" is very high. On the side, the qualitative content analysis revealed that the main problems of marketing discipline regard social criticisms and an accentuated confusion about what marketing really is. Furthermore, the qualitative content analysis allowed us to be more precise because taking in consideration the context of the syntactic structure was possible to verify the sentiment of the single Facebook status. Thus, the qualitative content analysis showed that terms such as "to sell" (one case), "to make a profit" (one case), and "communication" (one case) had, in some circumstances, a positive connotation.

This research confirms the consideration suggested by Sheth et al. (2006) and Cluley (2016) about the marketing image problem. Despite its seemingly good intentions, marketing is mainly perceived as a "dirty word" (Dalsace and Markovitch 2009). Specifically, it is identified with the subtle art of manipulation and selling.

There currently exists a profound gap between marketing identity and Italian public opinion's perceptions of the discipline. Thus, questioning the main causes of marketing's "image problem" is fundamental. Gamble et al. (2011) suggest that is a matter of people's ignorance. We believe that both marketing scholars and practitioners are not exempt from faults. Using the language of brand management, "identity precedes image. Before projecting an image to the public, we must know exactly what we want to project" (Kapferer 2012, p. 174). Thus, if an image problem exists, is because marketers do not communicate their identity, that is, the meaning and essence of their discipline, in the right way. Practitioners, instead, adopting aggressive, misleading and unethical tactics, contradict the declared mission to improve social welfare expressed in the AMA's definition,

and facilitate the proliferation of marketing's negative images over time. Thus, according to Cluley (2016, p. 765), the main cause of marketing image problem is not "ignorance" or "misrepresentation" but its wrong conduct, which makes people feel uncomfortable and doubtful of some marketing practices.

The real cause of the marketing image problem is the direct consequence of the incapacity of marketing discipline to make true use of the Ancient Greek aphorism "Know Thyself". To counteract marketing's image problem, academic and practitioners community need to engage in introspection, such as reflecting on how well do they do what they do, and how society actually sees them. Unfortunately, this topic represents a quite neglected area of research.

Asking why marketing has an image problem is an urgent question. Finding the right answers would help to revive the fortunes of a discipline that, as prominent scholars show (Clark et al. 2014; Varadarajan 2010; Hunt 2018; Jones and Shaw 2018), is troubled and in decline from an academic standpoint too.

Clark et al. (2014), using ISI Web of Knowledge citation data, maintain that marketing is becoming the least influential of the four major business disciplines (i.e., accounting, finance, management, and marketing) in terms of interdisciplinary citation flows. Furthermore, according to Varadarajan (2010), the discipline is facing an "identity crisis" because "the growing balkanization of academic marketing into quantitative modeling and consumer behavior has diminished research on strategic marketing issues". On the side, Hunt (2018) observes that most of the current research in marketing is "modelling-based". This means that research, rather than starting with theory development in one or more of marketing's considerable domains, is guided by secondary datasets that have only proxy coverage of marketing concepts. Thus, dozens of articles, published in the top journal, deal with issues, such as consumer research, that are often non-marketing or business issues. Besides, Hunt (2018) highlights that another problematic aspect regarding the extant marketing discipline is that many doctoral programmes do not teach the history of marketing thought. This is a serious problem because in order to develop new concepts and theory both doctoral students and established scholars should understand the evolution of ideas, how concepts and theories are linked together. Furthermore, according to Jones and Shaw (2018), "The history of marketing thought […] provides us with an intellectual heritage, a sense of origin and identity. It nurtures a closer attachment with the subject and to the discipline".

To resolve its image problem, marketing needs to fight its inner demons both from an academic and practical standpoint. The interpretation of how society actually sees marketing may be helpful for practitioners. Understanding the main marketing activities that irritate common people in their everyday life, marketers would increase their set of knowledge, and gain insights on what does not work and what can be improved. This does not mean that practitioners should use this knowledge to create a subtle way to engage with consumers and gain economic advantage for themselves, but it must be considered as an opportunity to truly listen what consumers want. Furthermore, this research suggests to practitioners to develop and adopt less intrusive and more ethical tactics to sell and communicate the value of a certain product or service.

Since consumers accuse marketing to serve primarily business interests, practitioners should better communicate to society how they create value for consumers, for example by serving their interests, helping them to increase their quality of life and wellbeing, as well as contributing to building a better world. This prescription should be also extended to marketing scholars. To counteract marketing's reputation problem academics and organisations, such as AMA and Società Italiana Marketing (SIM), need to encourage honest and engaging discussions about the concrete role of marketing in culture, social and economic sphere. Moreover, a detailed public clarification of marketers' educational background and skills might be helpful to differentiate the real marketing professional from the smoke sellers.

This study represents the primary step of explorative research and it has some limitations. First, the extraction tool does not capture all the posts due to the restriction determined by the Facebook application programming interface (API) and privacy settings of the posting user, so the possibility that negative or positive statuses about marketing could be more conspicuous is not to exclude. Second, we focused only on Facebook, doing so we ignored other social media that could have furnished a broader perspective of the research problem. Further research should explore this topic by cross-national studies, or adopt techniques that allow researchers to compare user-generated content shared in the same period in various countries. Moreover, to explore more deeply how Italian people perceive marketing could be useful to conduct digital surveys or in-depth interviews. Adopting this research method it will be possible to observe how marketing's perception in the Italian context changes with a change of demographic characteristics such as interviewees' profession, level of education, residency, and age, that is, information that due to privacy policies we cannot retrieve using web data extraction.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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