

## MISUNDERSTOOD MARKETING

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**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to present and attempt to understand the common misconceptions about marketing among researchers, practitioners, and consumers. Additionally, the study aimed to examine whether each element of the 4P and 4C marketing mix is criticized by consumers, or if the criticism is limited to promotion and advertising.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Based on an analysis of scientific and business literature (desk research), the study identifies misconceptions about marketing among researchers and practitioners. Content analysis is conducted on social media, blogs, and online forums to determine the narratives on this topic and confirm that for each element of the marketing mix (4P and 4C), it is possible to identify critical consumer narratives that highlight the perceived ineffectiveness or low credibility of a given tool.

**Findings:** The article identifies the differences between the common perception and the true meaning of marketing within business strategy. The research confirms that for each element of the marketing mix (4P and 4C), it is possible to identify critical consumer narratives that highlight the perceived ineffectiveness or low credibility of a given tool.

**Research limitations/implications:** The review is limited by the transient nature of social media content, reliance on external sources, and its focus on the 4P and 4C models, excluding more advanced frameworks such as the 7P. Future studies should examine whether negative consumer perceptions of these tools shape broader views of marketing as manipulative, opaque, and misaligned with consumer values.

**Practical implications:** Academics, practitioners, and consumers all contribute to shaping the perception of marketing, often not fully leveraging over a century of accumulated knowledge and experience in the field. As a result, marketing is frequently misunderstood and reduced to short-term sales tactics, limiting its recognition as a strategic tool for long-term business success. This limited understanding leads to significant consequences, including reduced trust in marketing, ineffective business strategies, and missed opportunities to build lasting relationships with customers, ultimately affecting both business sustainability and public perception. The article serves as a foundation for further research and educational initiatives aimed at redefining marketing as a tool for long-term business value creation.

**Originality/value:** This article highlights common misconceptions about marketing and offers a basis for redefining it as a strategic, ethical tool for long-term business success. It shows how consumer criticism affects the perception of marketing in business and society and sets the stage for further research on its redefinition as both a science and a tool.

**Keywords:** Marketing Misunderstanding, Consumer Perception, Marketing Mix (4P, 4C), Criticism of marketing.

**Category of the paper:** General review, Case study.

## 1. Introduction

The shift from handmade to factory production during the 18th-century industrial revolution led to mass production and sales challenges. According to Al-Noorachi, "marketing emerged as a separate field to address the sales problems caused by mass production" (Al-Noorachi, 2014). Practitioners often associate marketing only with sales techniques, while consumers see it as a manipulative tool used by companies to push purchases.

Many students starting marketing studies view it as "a set of tools used by businesses to sell products" (Al-Noorachi, 2014). Lambin (2001) points out that marketing is often misunderstood by both critics and supporters, which leads to its devaluation. Marketing is frequently seen as a way to pressure consumers into accepting products, but this approach ignores buyers' true needs and focuses on the seller's interests. Critics argue that this view is disproven by the frequent failure of new products, which shows consumers' ability to resist manipulation and reject unsuitable products (Lambin, 2001).

## 2. Criticism and Misunderstanding of Marketing – Literature Review

Criticism of marketing has a long history, dating back to the early days of its academic existence. Between 1913 and 1915, when the first theoretical foundations of marketing were developed by scholars like P. Cherington, L. Weld, and A. Shaw, critics raised concerns about its effectiveness. E.D. Jones, from 1911 to 1914, highlighted the waste of resources in marketing, noting that in retail, marketing costs account for about 50% of the product price, with most of this spent on advertising and store displays, which he considered inefficient (Kozielski, 2013).

The lack of a clear definition of marketing leads to diverse interpretations, causing misunderstandings and controversies among researchers and practitioners. Al-Noorachi (2014) argues that such discrepancies can result in the devaluation of marketing, as inconsistent definitions hinder constructive discussion. Moreover, the ambiguity of definitions may lead to the marginalization of marketing, as it obstructs the development of the field (Krycia-Chomińska, 2025).

Marketing has developed from a traditional, transactional approach into a more modern, customer-focused concept, driven by changes in the capitalist economy. Classical definitions, as outlined by Szulce (2007), focus on company activities related to market planning and control, while modern definitions, such as Kotler's (2005), emphasize satisfying customer needs for profit. However, since the 1980s, these perspectives have faced criticism for being overly simplistic, production-oriented, and neglecting the active role of consumers (Otto, 2004;

Seliga, Woźniak, 2014). In response, newer approaches like relationship and partnership marketing have emerged, highlighting the importance of long-term customer relationships and value creation.

In the literature on management, sociology, and ethics, marketing is presented as a practice that, through PR, CSR, and branding, manipulates consumer awareness and collective identity to serve corporate interests. The ideology of marketing is also criticized for supporting the maintenance of power and the existing social order. However, proposals for ethical marketing, based on social responsibility and sustainable development, have also emerged (Sułkowski, Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021).

Numerous studies have shown that unethical marketing practices are not profitable for businesses. One example is unethical word-of-mouth marketing, such as paying individuals to post positive reviews without disclosing this information, which leads to a loss of consumer trust. Barton and Haghirian (2016) demonstrated that consumers are sensitive to manipulations on social media, resulting in negative reactions and weakened brand image. Companies can also face financial losses and penalties for such practices. In 2023, the Polish Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) imposed a fine of over 5 million PLN on Olimp Laboratories for improperly labeling advertising materials on social media. The company used influencers who did not disclose the commercial nature of their posts, misleading consumers. Advertising manipulations, such as exaggerating product benefits, lead to a decline in consumer loyalty. Eisenbeiss, Van Herpen, and Schifferstein (2012) showed that consumers who feel deceived lose trust in the brand, which lowers their loyalty and sales. Price manipulation, such as artificially inflating prices only to later offer discounts, also results in a loss of trust and boycotts. Chandon, Wansink, and Laurent (2000) noted that while such manipulations may temporarily boost sales, in the long term, they lead to negative outcomes because consumers feel deceived. Narver and Slater (1990) found that customer-oriented companies, which focus on understanding customer needs rather than manipulation, achieve better financial results in the long term.

Marketing, while typically aligned with companies' profit-maximization goals, can sometimes generate unintended negative consequences—even when addressing social needs. Overemphasis on certain strategies may contribute to excessive consumerism and reinforce social inequalities. For instance, campaigns promoting fast fashion encourage frequent purchases of low-quality clothing, fostering unsustainable consumption patterns and environmental harm (Assadourian, 2010). Similarly, the aggressive marketing of ultra-processed foods by global corporations has been linked to increased consumption of unhealthy products, particularly among lower-income populations (Hastings, 2012). Selective targeting strategies may also exclude certain groups, reinforcing social divisions and inequalities (Cova, Cova, 2002). Moreover, some companies adopt socially engaged narratives—such as advocating for women's rights or environmental causes—not as a genuine commitment, but primarily to improve their public image (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Marketing can also shape

social identities by promoting lifestyles and values that differentiate between "desirable" and "undesirable" consumers, leading to marginalization and social pressure (Baudrillard, 1998; Kamiński, 2014).

The impact of marketing on professionals' perception is often shaped by their initial contact with marketing concepts at the beginning of their education. The future evaluation of marketing is determined by the teaching methods that lead to acquiring knowledge and skills. Oczachowski (2016) points out the weaknesses of marketing literature used in education, highlighting its biased style, which merges various threads and objectives, often leading to misleading messages that influence future practitioners. One popular approach is presenting marketing as a set of tools – the 4P marketing mix (McCarthy, 1964), which includes a collection of tactical marketing instruments that a company combines to provoke a desired market response. This framework, developed in 1964, is criticized for its outdatedness, producer-centric perspective, lack of consideration for customer relationships, limited scope for different markets, and absence of strong theoretical foundations, yet it remains present in textbooks used in academic programs.

Expectations formed during studies regarding marketing can lead to its perception as morally questionable methods of influencing customer decisions, using information asymmetry, manipulation, deception, or small lies to achieve "miraculous" sales increases. Rogowski (2008) provides examples of criticisms directed at the most scrutinized elements of the 4P – advertising and promotion: selling defective or dangerous products, flashy packaging providing exaggerated information about the product, and deceptive pricing and delivery practices. However, the criticism and complaints may apply to all marketing tools.

Marketing is often misunderstood and used in ways that can lead to ethical and social abuses. Business leaders frequently view it solely as a tool for quick sales increases, neglecting its long-term, strategic role in building customer relationships and creating lasting brand value. As Kamiński (2016) notes, "marketing is still often limited to sales or promotional functions, rather than being seen as a process of creating value for the customer and developing long-term relationships." This reductionist view leads to an instrumental approach to marketing, focusing managers only on financial results, thereby marginalizing its broader social, cultural, and economic impacts. Furthermore, such managerial perceptions undermine the academic status of marketing, overlooking its interdisciplinary nature. Levitt (1960) already described a focus on product maintenance or sales effectiveness over customer satisfaction, a short-sighted marketing approach that can result in loss of market position and growth potential. Examples of companies that made this mistake include Kodak, which failed to adapt to the digital revolution, and Nokia, which could not adjust to technological changes in the smartphone industry. Both companies prioritized the protection and development of traditional products rather than aligning with evolving customer needs and preferences.

A common criticism of marketing is its inability to clearly demonstrate the benefits it brings to organizations, particularly in terms of measuring the impact of marketing expenditures on the growth of company value. The difficulty in precisely determining how specific marketing activities contribute to the final outcome undermines the effectiveness of marketing performance analysis, which is a significant issue from an economic perspective (Oczachowski, 2016).

According to Rust and colleagues (2004), organizations face challenges in measuring the long-term effects of marketing due to the time lag of results and the difficulty of isolating the impact of marketing actions from other market factors. The dominance of short-term financial metrics in company reporting systems, coupled with the pressure to show results in quarterly cycles, naturally favors tactics that yield immediate outcomes. The lack of widely accepted standards for measuring long-term marketing values, such as brand equity or customer loyalty, further complicates companies' ability to consistently assess and appreciate the strategic dimension of marketing.

Expectations regarding marketing tools often overlook contextual factors, resulting in overgeneralization, reliance on outdated research, and misuse of marketing principles. Managers frequently apply tools to solve specific issues without considering that marketing research, like other social sciences, must be interpreted within particular temporal and spatial contexts (Woleński, 2022). For instance, Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign, successful in some regions, struggled in markets like China and Taiwan due to cultural mismatches. Similarly, Tropicana's packaging redesign—intended to appeal to younger consumers—backfired, causing a 20% sales decline and necessitating a return to the original design (Sharp, 2010). These examples highlight the importance of adapting marketing strategies to specific cultural and market conditions rather than relying on universal assumptions.

Another mistake is applying mature marketing principles to markets that are still underdeveloped. Examples of such errors include products that consumers are not ready for, such as Vidal Sassoon's Wash & Go shampoo, introduced to the Polish market in the 1990s as a 2-in-1 shampoo and conditioner. It failed to gain expected popularity because Polish consumers, unfamiliar with using conditioners, preferred traditional shampoos, and the 2-in-1 concept was not widely accepted. Another example is pricing not adjusted to local income levels, as seen with Apple's initial failure in markets like India, where the high prices of iPhones were unaffordable for local consumers.

Also expectations placed on marketing tools that do not consider the situational context of the results lead to a loss of credibility for marketing as a discipline, as the ineffectiveness of one tool is generalized to marketing. These types of errors, in addition to the lack of effectiveness perceived by marketing managers, can also result in a loss of consumer trust, reduced effectiveness of marketing activities, and a weakened market position for the company.

A common criticism of marketing, shared by consumers and organizations alike, is its paradoxical effectiveness—while it successfully influences behavior, it also contributes to overconsumption, resource depletion, and negative effects on well-being and the environment. Consumers often perceive marketing narrowly, viewing it as manipulative sales tactics rather than as a value-creating, educational, and needs-driven process. Although marketers have access to powerful tools, they frequently fail to consider their ethical and social responsibilities, which can result in harm to individuals and society (Sudoł, 2016). Interestingly, consumers' assessments of marketing tools are inconsistent – they claim ads don't influence them (Davison, 1983), yet simultaneously blame marketers for persuading them into unnecessary purchases (Pollay, Mittal, 1993).

In the context of the widespread presence of brands on social media and the ease of direct communication between consumers and brands—as well as among consumers themselves—content analysis in these platforms offers a valuable tool for understanding how marketing activities are perceived. Even when based on commonly criticized, yet widely taught models such as the 4P marketing mix (McCarthy, 1960) and the 4C framework (Lauterborn, 1990), social media content analysis can yield meaningful insights into consumer responses to specific marketing instruments. These include product, price, place, and promotion (4P), as well as communication, convenience, cost, and customer value (4C).

This leads to the hypothesis that for each element of the marketing mix (4P and 4C), it is possible to identify critical consumer narratives that highlight the perceived ineffectiveness or low credibility of a given tool. This reflects an extension of the objections to advertising and promotion discussed by Rogowski (2008).

### **3. Methodology**

To test the hypothesis, a review was conducted of consumer reactions to marketing tools used by companies and institutions, as expressed in social media. The goal was to examine whether each element of the 4P and 4C marketing mix is criticized by consumers, or if the criticism is limited to promotion and advertising. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the existence and nature of negative narratives regarding how marketing and its instruments (4P and 4C marketing mix models) are perceived and evaluated by consumers, rather than their statistical representativeness or prevalence. This review, which includes both Polish and international examples, also aims to outline the boundaries of socially acceptable marketing practices in digital spaces and the potential consequences of crossing them. Furthermore, this serves as an introduction to further analysis of how the use of marketing tools—when negatively evaluated by consumers—may affect the overall perception of marketing as a scientific discipline.

The review was conducted between March and April 2025 using the desk research method. Due to the temporary nature of social media content and the difficulty of archiving it, as well as the aim to identify the consequences of consumer reactions, examples were primarily sourced from external outlets such as online news media. This approach ensured that despite the ephemeral nature of social media posts, their description in more permanent external media not only preserved these reactions but also amplified and highlighted consumer sentiment regarding the described situations, making their impact more evident for analysis. The review covered content related to the following social media platforms: TikTok, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Reddit. All cases presented later in the paper are illustrative in nature and serve to highlight the identified critical narratives regarding individual elements of the marketing mix (4P and 4C), rather than to statistically generalize their frequency.

One effective tool used in this review for analyzing consumer reactions on social media is the hashtag, a word or phrase preceded by the hash symbol (#). Hashtags help categorize content and increase its visibility, while their ability to group posts by topic makes them valuable for analyzing consumer reactions and enabling two-way marketing communication, allowing both promotion and public feedback.

## 4. Results

The examples of consumer reactions to marketing activities on social media presented below are illustrative in nature. Their purpose is to identify the existence and nature of the critical narratives regarding each element of the marketing mix (4P and 4C) [previous conversation, 75]. It should be emphasized that they do not constitute a statistically representative sample nor are they intended to determine the prevalence or frequency of these narratives. They were selected to highlight the types of perceived dissatisfaction and the consequences of exceeding socially acceptable marketing practices. A summary of examples of consumer reactions to marketing activities on social media is presented below:

### 1. Product

Since 2020, a series of videos titled "#AmazonBasicsFails" have appeared on TikTok and YouTube, highlighting the poor quality of Amazon's private-label products, which has influenced the perception of the entire product line.

A Twitter user ZabX@zabikozord noted in 2017 that Isana and Alterra products in Poland had fewer ingredients and were more expensive than their counterparts in Germany, prompting her to file a complaint with the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK). For example, a 500ml Isana liquid soap costs PLN 3.49

in Poland and an equivalent of PLN 2.35 in Germany, even though the Polish one has 16 ingredients and the German one has 19.

## 2. Price

TikTok users began posting videos showing that prices in the McDonald's app were higher than in the restaurant, leading to the hashtag #McDonaldsScam and official company explanations.

On TikTok, users created a trend under the hashtag #RyanairReality, where they shared experiences related to additional fees charged by the airline. Videos under this hashtag showcased how an initially low ticket price significantly increases when mandatory charges for baggage, seat selection, and other services are added, aiming to highlight the airline's pricing practices. For example, TikTok user Gleza Elena Serrano posted a video titled "Challenges of Flying with Ryanair: A Reality Check," in which she discusses typical issues encountered when flying with Ryanair, including extra fees and other difficulties related to budget airlines.

## 3. Place (Distribution)

During the Black Friday sale, Zara's website crashed, triggering a wave of complaints on Instagram and Twitter under the brand's promotional posts, exposing weaknesses in its e-commerce infrastructure.

On Facebook, posts from Polish Lidl regularly attract comments about the unavailability of promoted products on the first day of the promotion, leading to the introduction of sales restrictions in some stores, such as limiting the number of Wittchen bags to two per customer, despite earlier assurances that there would be no product rationing.

## 4. Promotion

Snapchat's "Would You Rather" ad, which asked users whether they would "rather hit Rihanna or Chris Brown" (referencing the history of domestic violence), triggered a strong backlash on Twitter and led to a \$800 million drop in Snapchat's stock value.

An Instagram ad for micellar water, featuring a photograph of the product placed on a grave during All Saints' Day, faced criticism from users who deemed it inappropriate and disrespectful in the context of the solemnity of the holiday and the location.

## 5. Customer

The removal of popular TV shows and movies from Netflix sparked the #CancelNetflix campaign on Twitter, where subscribers questioned the value of the service as its catalog shrank and prices increased.

Rossmann in Poland introduced changes to its loyalty program, shifting from a simple discount system to a more complex points-based system. This led to a wave of negative comments on Rossmann's Instagram, with customers highlighting the reduced real value of the loyalty program.



## 6. Communication

Starbucks' "Race Together" campaign, which encouraged baristas to engage customers in conversations about racism, sparked a wave of criticism on Twitter under the hashtag #RaceTogether. Users pointed out the inappropriateness of such communication in the context of ordering coffee.

The humorous tone of communications from mBank in Poland about app outages provoked mixed reactions on Twitter. While some customers appreciated the humor, others criticized the lack of seriousness in communication from a financial institution. For example, in 2020, mBank accidentally sent push notifications with the text "ęśąćź" and "test wiadomości push," causing confusion and server overload. mBank's deputy spokesperson, Piotr Rutkowski, apologized for the incident, explaining it was a mistake caused by the app.

## 7. Convenience

On TikTok, videos from delivery drivers became popular, showing how the Uber Eats app directs them to incorrect addresses under the hashtag #UberEatsAddressConfusion. This sparked a discussion about the inconveniences related to incorrect locations and the frustrations of both drivers and customers.

On X, the hashtag #PKPIntercity has been used by travelers in Poland to regularly document issues with the PKP Intercity mobile app, especially during peak travel times. They highlighted problems with seat reservations and the app's lack of functionality, which can lead to misunderstandings with conductors. One example is Jerzy Gozdek, who had trouble showing his ticket due to a lack of network coverage and the app failing to save tickets in its memory.

## 8. Cost

The price increase of Amazon Prime sparked discussions on Reddit in the r/AmazonPrime group, where users analyzed whether the rising costs of the service were still justified by the benefits it offered. They compared price changes across various countries, highlighting differences and trying to assess whether the service's value aligned with the new costs.

The introduction of higher subscription fees and charges for account sharing by Netflix in Poland led to discussions in Facebook groups, where users organized to share accounts within allowed households or switched to competing platforms. Since May 2023, Netflix in Poland limited account sharing to users within the same household, tweeted "Your Netflix account is for you and your household". Customers negatively commented on this decision, arguing that it contradicted Netflix's earlier stance in 2017, when the company supported sharing login information, tweeted "Love is sharing a password". Following the policy change, users felt deceived and expressed their dissatisfaction, citing Netflix's previous approach, leading to a surge of negative comments and considerations of switching to rival platforms.

## 5. Discussion

External sources, such as press articles, user comments on social media, and discussions on forums, serve as a lasting base of information that can shape the long-term image of a company. These sources remain accessible on the internet and influence how consumers perceive a brand.

The review of social media examples reveals a critical narrative towards corporate marketing actions, highlighting the growing awareness and demands of consumers. Users often question the authenticity and transparency of brand actions, pointing out discrepancies in pricing, unethical campaigns, or poor service and product quality. Negative reactions also arise from poor communication or misleading loyalty strategies, undermining the effectiveness of traditional marketing tools.

The review of consumer opinions confirms that for each element of the marketing mix (4P and 4C), critical narratives can be identified, indicating the ineffectiveness or low credibility of certain tools, which supports the hypothesis that for each element of the marketing mix (4P and 4C), it is possible to identify critical consumer narratives that highlight the perceived ineffectiveness or low credibility of a given tool.

## 6. Conclusions

The above review, due to its qualitative and exploratory nature, focused on identifying the existence and type of negative consumer narratives in social media discourse, provides a basis for further analysis. Future research can examine whether negative perceptions of specific marketing tools—such as pricing, distribution, and communication—contribute to viewing marketing as manipulative and unresponsive to consumer needs. It may also explore how critical narratives regarding tools from the 4P and 4C models shape the broader perception of marketing as disconnected from consumer values.

It should be emphasized that the presented cases (e.g., #McDonaldsScam, #CancelNetflix, or #AmazonBasicsFails) lack statistical grounding and do not indicate the representativeness of their prevalence, which is a conscious limitation of qualitative research.

Negative reactions on social media can damage brand image, reduce trust, and force corrective actions like public apologies, pricing changes, or product revisions. Over time, such responses may promote greater transparency and integrate customer feedback more deeply into value creation and communication.

These trends influence marketing's overall image, reinforcing perceptions of it as manipulative or disconnected from real needs, which weakens its credibility and ability to build long-term relationships.

While this analysis focused on the 4P and 4C frameworks, it does not reflect the full complexity of marketing models, including the extended 7P mix for services (Booms, Bitner, 1981). Future analysis can investigate how dynamic aspects of social media, such as algorithmic filtering, virality, and online polarization, might distort or amplify negative perceptions.

Marketing is often misunderstood by academics, practitioners, and consumers. In both academic literature and public opinion, it is sometimes seen as a tool for manipulation, used by companies to influence consumer awareness, support corporate interests, and reinforce social inequalities. Critics argue that marketing can promote excessive consumerism, marginalize certain social groups, and focus on short-term profits rather than long-term value.

Researchers have frequently pointed out the lack of consensus regarding the definition of this discipline (Al-Noorachi, 2014; Krycia-Chomińska, 2025), which results in confusion and undermines its position. Instead of viewing emerging concepts as logically connected stages of evolution responding to social and economic changes, they are often seen as mutually exclusive. Practitioners, on the other hand, reduce marketing to a set of sales techniques, ignoring its strategic, ethical, and social dimensions. Marketing also faces similar criticism from consumers – social media regularly feature voices questioning the authenticity of brand actions, pointing out the poor quality of products, unethical campaigns, or manipulative loyalty strategies. As a result, marketing is reinforced as a superficial, manipulative discipline that does not align with the real expectations of consumers, undermining its social usefulness and long-term effectiveness of used tools, like marketing mix 4P and 4C.

The consequences of such an approach are significant – marketing is often seen as an unnecessary addition to "real" business, leading to the marginalization of its academic contributions and a decrease in the position of marketers within organizations. Their activities are reduced to operational functions, ignoring the strategic dimension of marketing and reducing it to superficial, short-term goals.

As a result, marketing becomes a victim of instrumental business thinking. The key issue is its narrow understanding by organizational leaders, who reduce marketing to a tool solely for profit maximization. This approach ignores its potential as a holistic process for building long-term, sustainable relationships with customers, employees, partners, and local communities. As Wojciechowski (2014) points out, in this context, "marketing missteps" occur—situations where marketing activities, although effective in the short term, cause long-term damage to brand reputation or social relationships. Kamiński (2016) adds that the instrumental treatment of marketing leads to the formation of a generation of specialists who view their role solely through the lens of corporate interest, losing sight of the broader social and environmental context of their actions.

Marketing loses its identity as a discipline focused on strategically creating value and building authentic relationships, becoming perceived as a tool of manipulation subordinated to the logic of short-term profit. This not only diminishes its potential but also undermines social trust and harms the reputation of marketing as a science—both as a field of knowledge and as a practice.

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