

# Marketing redefined: A qualitative and integrative literature review charting the evolution of marketing definitions

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study uses the integrative literature review (ILR) methodology to examine the evolution of marketing definitions through technological transformation, demonstrating ILR's unique capacity to synthesise diverse sources and reveal thematic developments in marketing's progression.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research implements a systematic five-step ILR process encompassing review design, establishing inclusion/exclusion criteria, comprehensive literature searches, data extraction, and critical synthesis to identify key patterns and shifts in marketing definitions over time.

**Findings:** The analysis reveals a progressive shift in marketing definitions from transactional approaches towards a value co-creation paradigm characterised by multiple interconnected actors operating in service ecosystems.

**Originality:** This study advances the qualitative methodological discourse by demonstrating ILR's effectiveness in examining complex, evolving concepts, distinguishing itself from traditional systematic review approaches.

**Research implications:** The findings establish a foundation for the future application of the ILR methodology in emerging marketing domains, particularly in digital transformation and sustainability contexts.

**Practical implications:** The research provides scholars and practitioners with insights for aligning marketing strategies with contemporary demands through a comprehensive understanding of marketing's definitional evolution.

**Keywords:** Integrative literature review, qualitative research, marketing, value exchange



## INTRODUCTION

In the endeavour to understand phenomena, scholars increasingly embrace innovative systematic approaches to navigate the vast expanse of the scholarly literature landscape. These novel systematic methodologies and tailored search approaches serve multiple functions: they enhance the efficiency of the literature review process (Gentles *et al.*, 2016), reveal previously overlooked insights (Soaita *et al.*, 2019), and promote cross-disciplinary collaboration (Snyder, 2019). As a result, these methodologies are catalysing the pace of scientific discovery and knowledge advancement (Thilakaratne *et al.*, 2019). Traditional literature reviews often fail to capture the depth and breadth of evolving research areas, lacking rigour and a systematic methodology, and requiring more sophisticated approaches to synthesise knowledge effectively (Snyder, 2019).

This evolution in review methodologies reflects the need for comprehensive frameworks that summarise existing research, identify gaps, and guide future inquiries. Contemporary literature review methodologies encompass a variety of approaches, including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, bibliometric reviews, integrative literature reviews (ILRs), and many more — each serving distinct yet complementary purposes. For example, systematic reviews provide rigorous syntheses of evidence (Galvao *et al.*, 2019); meta-analyses aggregate quantitative findings (Allbritton *et al.*, 2024; Morris, 2023); bibliometric reviews identify scholarly patterns and networks (Marzi *et al.*, 2024); and integrative literature reviews offer comprehensive thematic syntheses across diverse studies (Basu, Barinas, Williams, Clanton, & Smith, 2023).

The emergence of specialised journals dedicated exclusively to literature reviews (such as the *Academy of Management Review*) and the publication of special issues focused on various forms of literature reviews (such as the *Journal of Business Research*'s edition (2021) on 'Thematic literature reviews, bibliographic, and meta-analyses in marketing and international business') substantiate the growing importance of standalone literature reviews in academia (Paul & Criado, 2020). In this regard, Snyder (2019) argues that systematic reviews offer a unique power in addressing research questions by integrating findings from multiple empirical studies.

Despite the recent surge in systematic literature review research across the business, management, and particularly the marketing literature, according to Coombe (2023), many reviews still fall short in quality and reporting standards. Lim *et al.* (2022) suggest that this deficiency could be attributed to the absence of a rigorous, standardised methodology for conducting and evaluating such reviews. In marketing journals, literature review methodologies manifest as bibliometric analyses, meta-analyses, and, predominantly, systematic reviews (e.g., Crosno *et al.*, 2021; Gernsheimer *et al.*, 2021). Systematic reviews focus primarily on two metrics: document count (measuring productivity) and citation count (gauging influence and popularity) (Martinez-Lopez *et al.*, 2018); therefore, they are purely quantitative.

This paper responds to Coombe's (2023) call-to-action for marketing scholarship to engage further with optimising rigorous literature review research, and addresses Lim *et al.*'s (2022) and Coombe's (2023) concerns about quality and reporting standards. This paper aims to provide guidelines to demonstrate the optimisation of rigour when undertaking an integrated literature review as an alternative to predominantly quantitative systematic reviews in marketing literature reviews. To illustrate the application of the guidelines, this integrated literature review synthesises the evolution of marketing through the lens of technological advancements, examining marketing definitions during the Third and Fourth Industrial Revolutions. The paper contributes to the marketing literature by offering researchers and practitioners guidelines for qualitatively optimising their rigour when undertaking an integrative literature review. This paper first examines qualitative literature review methodologies, focusing on the integrated literature review (ILR): its application, selection criteria, and purpose. Second, it details the steps in conducting an ILR, offering guidance to ensure rigour. It concludes by emphasising the value of qualitative ILRs in producing high-quality, innovative literature reviews, particularly in marketing research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is a critical component of any research process because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the knowledge and research gaps in the area of enquiry (Kutcher & LeBaron, 2022). As a research methodology, a literature review contributes significantly to different domains' conceptual, methodological, and thematic development (Fan *et al.*, 2022; Hulland & Houston, 2020). This section examines the spectrum of literature review methodologies, articulates their distinct purposes, and provides a rationale for using an ILR methodology to analyse the evolution of marketing definitions.

In the domain of the social sciences, under which marketing falls, Massaro, Dumay and Guthrie (2016) note that the development of a literature review and the resulting flood of literature reviews has led to various classifications, all of which share essential features such as collecting, evaluating, and presenting research evidence. However, owing to the overlap between these methods of literature review, it is not uncommon for confusion to arise when classifying or describing them (Aveyard & Bradbury-Jones, 2019). Scholars distinguish between several kinds of literature reviews, such as systematic reviews, meta-analyses, rapid reviews, traditional (narrative) reviews, research syntheses, and systematic literature reviews. Although these different types of literature reviews are offered in the literature, Massaro *et al.* (2016) note that the main distinguishing feature of these reviews is how such approaches are developed. Our paper discusses the three most common classifications of literature reviews commonly used in the social sciences: traditional (narrative), systematic, and integrative reviews. These are examined next.

### NARRATIVE (TRADITIONAL) LITERATURE REVIEW

This approach is unsystematic and involves subjective choices about including information from various sources. Consequently, it may result in biased interpretations or inferences owing to the lack of explicit criteria for selection. This subjectivity, which stems from the lack of a systematic method for locating and analysing studies, results in an incomplete 'snapshot' of the phenomenon (Bae, 2014). According to Green *et al.* (2006), narrative reviewers have the discretion to disregard or restrict the consideration of specific studies to support their argument.

### SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Mikkonen and Kääriäinen (2020) describe a systematic literature review as a rigorous research methodology that involves identifying and screening relevant original research, synthesising data, tabulating selected studies based on the research question, and interpreting the results to create evidence-based decision-making. Systematic reviews serve several purposes, including critically evaluating a predefined area of research, bridging knowledge gaps, and helping researchers to define key concepts and relationships in their field of study. Toronto and Remington (2020) emphasise that a systematic review is characterised by a single, narrowly focused research question, typically formulated in a PICO (P = population, I = intervention, C = comparison, O = outcomes) format. Compared with traditional narrative reviews, Van Ewijk and Ros-Tonen (2021) claim that systematic literature reviews offer more methodological rigour, increasing the credibility of the documented results. A significant weakness of this type of review is that it may not be appropriate when reviewing a broad topic, when the research questions are less well-defined, or when the review aims to develop a theory through a more exploratory process (Fan *et al.*, 2022).

### INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Torraco (2016), an ILR is a particular form of research that generates new knowledge about a topic by reviewing, critiquing, and synthesising the representative literature on a topic in an integrated way so that new frameworks and perspectives emerge. The ILR aims to assess the quality of scientific research, discover gaps in what is already known, infer the generalisation of a phenomenon, identify key themes, and make connections between related fields (Dela & Gross, 2017).

An ILR is among the most valuable tools for advancing knowledge and research in a topic area. ILRs are firmly rooted in a representative description of a field. Dela and Gross (2017) describe an ILR as a literature review that involves identifying, categorising, and analysing previous research studies to generate new knowledge and to draw conclusions. Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020) note that this non-experimental approach not only reviews the existing literature on a topic but also leads to the creation of new frameworks and perspectives by critiquing and synthesising the representative literature on a topic in an integrated way. Jones-Devitt, Austen and Parkin (2017) assert that ILRs go beyond the traditional boundaries of a systematic review by incorporating multiple sources of data, including both empirical and theoretical literature, and using a combination of data from different research designs, rather than assuming that these designs are mutually exclusive. The salient feature of an ILR is its thoroughness and diversity in its search strategy, which includes at least two to three different data sources, as Kutcher and LeBaron (2022) point out. These data sources may consist of computerised databases with citation indices, manual searches of journals, internet searches, contacts with researchers, networks, and other searches. An ILR provides a more holistic understanding of a particular phenomenon by synthesising research findings and drawing conclusions from multiple sources. This methodology also provides a high degree of rigour owing to a comprehensive and transparent search and evaluation process and the synthesis of multiple literature sources.

THE SELECTION OF AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH FOR THIS STUDY

An ILR is more appropriate for this study because it allows for a synthesis of the available literature. This approach also enables synthesising various theoretical and empirical studies to fully understand the phenomena under study. This helps formulate and raise practical questions, identify theoretical and conceptual frameworks related to each topic, and critically examine the research methodology used by other scholars. Russell (2005) adds that ILRs are crucial in assessing the strength of scientific evidence, identifying gaps in current research, generating research questions, and identifying theoretical or conceptual frameworks.

PURPOSES OF AN INTEGRATED LITERATURE REVIEW

TABLE 1 below presents the key purposes of ILRs, illustrating their role in synthesising knowledge, identifying gaps, and guiding research methodologies. Each purpose is supported by sources cited in the article, highlighting the contributions of ILRs to advancing academic inquiry.

TABLE 1: PURPOSES OF INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEWS

Purpose of ILRs	Description
Synthesis of knowledge	ILRs consolidate insights from diverse studies to understand comprehensively a specific topic or field (Linnenluecke, Marrone, & Singh, 2019; Pandey, 2024; Senivongse <i>et al.</i> , 2017).
Identification of gaps	Reviewing and synthesising the existing literature helps to identify areas lacking research, guide future studies, and avoid redundancy (Dumay, Bernardi, Guthrie, & Demartini, 2016; Williams, Clark, Clark, & Raffo, 2020).
Framework development	ILRs aid in developing theoretical frameworks by integrating findings from multiple studies and informing new research questions and hypotheses (Minerbo & Brito, 2021).
Contextualisation of research	ILRs situate new research within the broader academic discourse to justify its relevance and methodology (Kutcher & LeBaron, 2022; Pandey, 2024; Xiao & Watson, 2019).
Guidance for methodology	ILRs provide insights into methodological approaches used in previous studies to help design robust and rigorous research (Kraus, Breier, & Dasí-Rodríguez, 2020; Russell, 2005).
Enhancing theoretical and practical applications	ILRs help to bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering actionable insights to inform policies, strategies, and interventions (Lubbe, Ham-Baloyi, & Smit, 2020).
Cross-disciplinary integration	ILRs incorporate knowledge from various disciplines, fostering interdisciplinary perspectives and a more holistic understanding of complex topics (Jones-Devitt, Austen, & Parkin, 2017).

Source: Authors' compilation

From TABLE 1, ILRs’ diverse applications contribute to theoretical advancement, practical insights, and methodological rigour across various disciplines.

**CHOICE OF MARKETING DEFINITIONS USED TO ILLUSTRATE THE USE OF ILR METHODOLOGY**

It is essential to provide a rationale for using an ILR methodology to analyse the evolution of marketing definitions. The marketing discipline has evolved significantly since it emerged as a distinct professional and managerial field in the 1960s (Nenonen, 2022). This evolution has been characterised by developing various subfields and schools of thought responding to changing contexts, reflecting responses to shifting socio-economic and technological contexts (Hunt, 2020). Notably, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has ushered in unprecedented technological advancements, fundamentally altering the marketing landscape (Rosário & Dias, 2022). The 4IR, characterised by the fusion of digital, physical, and biological technologies (Ocholla & Ocholla, 2020; Oke & Fernandes, 2020), has introduced new market challenges and opportunities. Compared with the three previous industrial revolutions, the 4IR exhibits more complexity and exponentiality (Olaitan, Issah & Wayi, 2021; Rutkowska & Sulich, 2020), requiring a re-evaluation of traditional marketing paradigms (Lies, 2019). This evolving dynamism in marketing thought and practice underscores the importance of understanding its historical trajectory to appreciate its present state and envisage its future directions.

**METHODOLOGY**

To illustrate the ILR method, we analysed 52 marketing definitions drawn from 1960 to 2024.

This study’s ILR process consisted of five steps: designing the review, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, conducting a comprehensive literature search, extracting relevant data, and critically analysing and synthesising the literature (Snyder, 2019; De Souza, Silva & Carvalho, 2010; Torraco, 2016). These steps are discussed in the subsections that follow.

**STEP 1: DESIGNING THE REVIEW**

This step formulated a focused review question using Booth’s (2006) suggested setting, perspective, intervention, comparison, and evaluation (SPICE) framework. By definition, SPICE is a tool for formulating research questions, particularly in evidence-based practice. TABLE 2 briefly explains each component of the SPICE framework and how it was applied in this study.

**TABLE 2: THE SPICE FRAMEWORK USED TO DEVELOP THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Setting (where?)	This review was conducted in the context of the third industrial revolution (3IR) and the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), which are periodised according to decades, from the 1960s to the 2020s.
Perspective (for whom?)	The review aimed to enhance the understanding of marketing’s evolution across the 3IR and the 4IR, thereby contributing to knowledge about marketing in the 4IR. This would be crucial for understanding marketing and identifying specific marketing aspects relevant to the study.
Intervention (what?)	The study used the ILR methodology critically to analyse and synthesise marketing definitions from the 3IR and the 4IR to reveal underlying patterns in marketing’s evolution.
Comparison (compared with what?)	The review compares patterns in marketing definitions during the IRs in and from previous decades.
Evaluation (with what result?)	The review resulted in a marketing definition for the 4IR. The analysis traces common patterns among the definitions to evaluate their contemporary relevance and applicability to marketing theory and practice.

Source: Adapted from Booth (2006).

The use of the SPICE framework in marketing, particularly in this study, enhances coherence, contextualisation, generativity, and transparency, and in the process enhances rigour, relevance, and credibility (Cumming, Bettini & Chow 2023). This structured approach ensures that the review remains focused and purposeful in examining marketing’s progression through the IRs. In this study, each letter in the SPICE acronym corresponds to a specific aspect that shaped the ILR’s purpose or question. In this ILR, ‘pattern’ refers to a particular viewpoint, lens, or stance from which a topic, issue, or phenomenon is observed, interpreted, and understood (Hughes, 2005). The SPICE framework also played a vital role as a systematic, rigorous, and comprehensive checklist to guide the review, thus enhancing its comprehensiveness and providing a transparent and methodical road map to clearly achieve this study’s aim.

STEP 2: ESTABLISHING INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

This study adopted the ALCOA tool to establish robust inclusion and exclusion criteria for marketing definitions, ensuring their relevance and reliability (Boston University Medical Campus [BUMC], 2011). ‘ALCOA’ stands for attributable, legible, contemporaneous, original, and accurate, each representing an essential characteristic of high-quality data (Singh, Punjabi & Shah, 2023). Although predominantly used in medical research (Lallas *et al.* 2022), this tool’s application in marketing is a novel approach, addressing the lack of prior literature that applies this tool in the marketing field. Following the ALCOA guidelines, each marketing definition was scrutinised to ensure that it met the standards of being attributable to a credible source, legible and understandable, contemporaneous with current marketing practices, making an original contribution, and accurately depicting marketing concepts. The specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, aligned with the ALCOA principles, are detailed in TABLE 3.

TABLE 3: THE ALCOA TOOL FOR ESTABLISHING INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Criteria	Brief description	How this criterion was applied in the study
Attributable	Data must be traceable to the originator.	Each definition was cited with comprehensive bibliographic details, ensuring traceability and relevance within the study’s scope.
Legible	Data should be readable and understandable.	All definitions and supporting commentary were formatted consistently and clearly, using accessible language to ensure comprehensibility.
Contemporaneous	Data must be recorded at the time of activity.	Data collection and analysis processes were documented in real time, with timestamps on all notes and entries to maintain contemporaneous records. This safeguarded the quality and credibility of the definitions included in the analysis.
Original	Data should be in their original form or a verified copy.	The definitions were sourced exclusively from well-established sources, such as peer-reviewed journals. In vivo coding was applied to ensure originality.
Accurate	Data must be correct, complete, valid, and reliable reflecting what was observed.	Each definition underwent a thorough verification process, with cross-referencing to multiple sources for validation. Consistent analysis methods and a peer review by research supervisors further bolstered the credibility of the sources.

Source: Adapted from the Boston University Medical Campus (2011)

As shown in TABLE 3, the ALCOA tool was pivotal in defining precise inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting marketing definitions. This tool fortified the credibility and reliability of the chosen definitions, and contributed to the comprehensive and systematic exploration of the evolution of marketing across the decades and IRs. Our search was restricted to carefully selected peer-reviewed journals and to grey literature to ensure that authoritative and validated definitions from diverse perspectives were considered for analysis.

Drawing from various scholarly databases, we sourced marketing definitions using targeted search phrases, ensuring a robust analysis grounded in authoritative and decade-specific literature. The data (marketing definitions) were selected from the Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus databases to ensure a comprehensive and diverse range of authoritative sources. Specific phrases used to generate the definitions were ‘marketing definition in [decade]’, ‘marketing defined in [decade]’, ‘what is marketing [decade]’, and ‘definition of



marketing in [decade]'. These inclusion/exclusion criteria ensured that the analysis drew on a comprehensive and diverse range of authoritative sources. The inclusion criteria encompassed three crucial aspects concerning the marketing definitions: (1) the definition must have been published in the specific decade under consideration; (2) the definition must have been peer-reviewed; and (3) the definition must have been from theoretical sources. The exclusion criteria were definitions of marketing published outside the decade under consideration, which were excluded from the analysis to maintain the focus on the study's historiographical scope. Using the inclusion/exclusion criteria described above, the next step was to conduct the literature search described in the next step.

### **STEP 3: LITERATURE SEARCH**

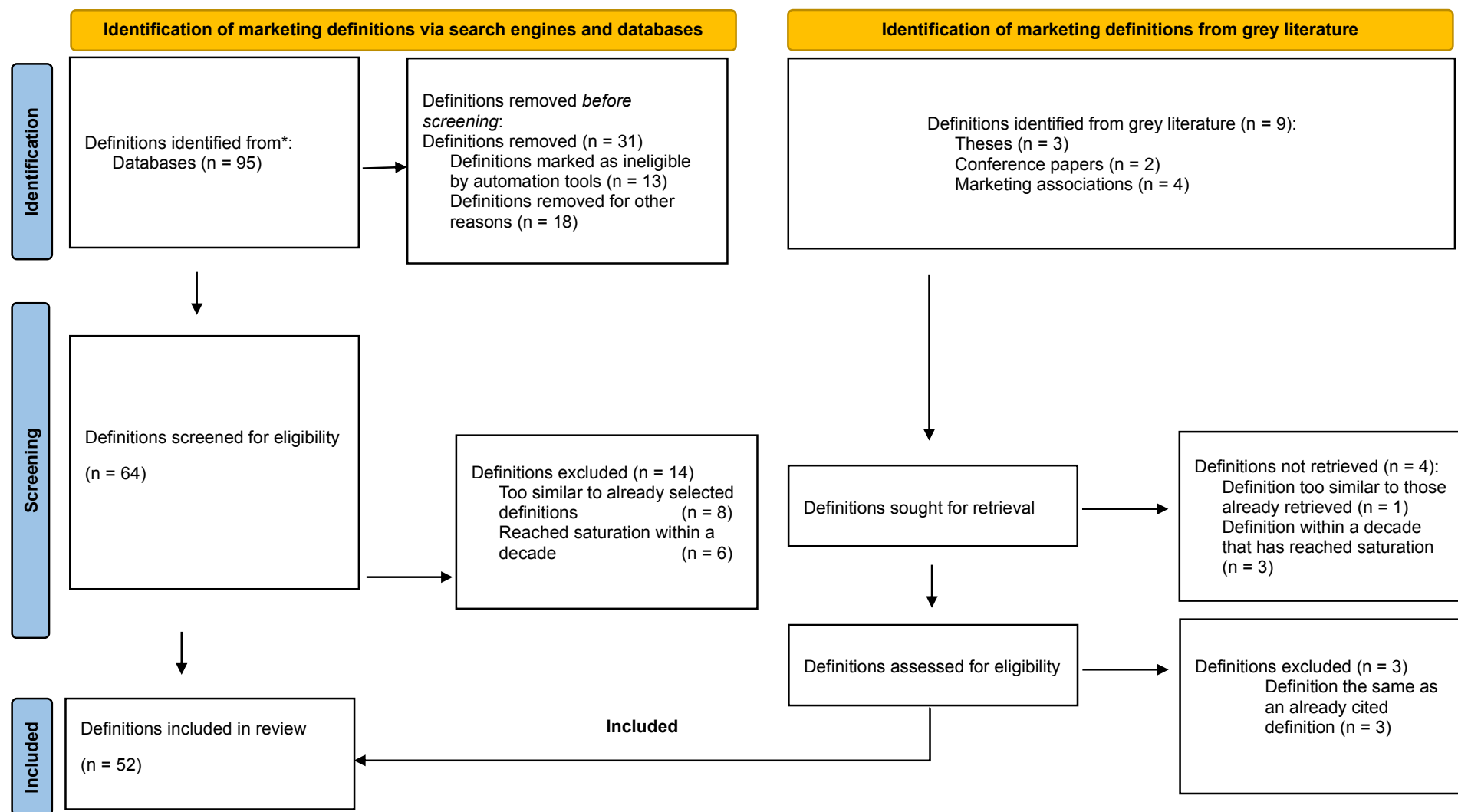
The literature search was periodised at two levels to identify the marketing definitions: periodisation at the Industrial Revolution level (level one), followed by periodisation according to decades, starting with the 1960s (level two). This periodisation sought to establish a historical framework that elucidated the evolution of marketing thought and practice. Periodisation divides the past into discrete, quantified, named units for analysis or study (De La Rasilla, 2019). Marketing scholars often use periodisation to investigate the history of marketing practice (Cooke & Kumar, 2020). In marketing, periodisation has become a systematic way to organise and analyse the historical trajectory of marketing, highlighting its key developments and trends as it shifts over time (Haavisto, 2021). Periodisation is also an analytical framework that helps structure arguments (Sato, 2015).

The first level of periodisation was at the IR level, where marketing definitions were periodised for the 3IR and the 4IR. Starting with the 1960s, the two most recent IRs were selected owing to their contemporary relevance and impact on current marketing theory and practice. In the 4IR era, the fusion of digital, physical, and biological technologies has accelerated the creation of novel value propositions, services, and business models (Krafft *et al.*, 2020) at an unprecedented pace, which requires another look at what marketing means in the 4IR.

At the second level of step 3, the 3IR and the 4IR were periodised further into different decades, starting with the 1960s, when marketing gained recognition as a distinct discipline (Hunt *et al.*, 2022). This facilitated a comparative analysis of marketing perspectives to identify similarities, differences, and evolutionary trends over specific shorter periods, allowing us to understand better how marketing has responded to the changing societal and technological landscapes across the two IRs.

After the periodisation, the literature search was conducted while adhering to the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA 2020 framework. Figure 1 below summarises the literature search using the PRISMA framework.

FIGURE 1: PRISMA 2020 FLOW DIAGRAM FOR NEW SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS



\*If feasible, consider reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

Source: Adapted from Haddaway *et al.* (2022)



From Figure 1, using the PRISMA framework, the initial search of the identified databases yielded 95 definitions. Subsequent screening, guided by a six-step theoretical analysis procedure, excluded 31 definitions. The remaining 64 were then evaluated for their adherence to the inclusion/exclusion criteria, which included relevance to the 3IR and the 4IR and their distinctiveness from previously selected definitions. This process resulted in the further exclusion of redundant definitions or those that fell within decades already saturated with data. After successfully conducting the literature search, the next step was to extract the relevant data.

STEP 4: EXTRACTING RELEVANT DATA

In this fourth step of the ILR process, 52 marketing definitions extracted in the previous step were identified for detailed analysis. Data extraction tables were created in Microsoft Excel for better organisation. An example is provided in TABLE 4 below.

TABLE 4: EXAMPLE OF DATA EXTRACTION TABLE

Decade	Extracted data
	Extracted definitions of marketing
1960s	"The marketing concept is a philosophy, not a system of marketing or an organisational structure. It is founded on the belief that profitable sales and satisfactory returns on investment can only be achieved by identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer needs and desires" (Barwell, 1965:3).
	'A social process by which any organism, individual, enterprise, or institution – be it an army, business, church government, hospital, industry, political party, school or social club – relates itself to its external environment. In this relationship, the organisation provides services and exchanges values with this environment. It thereby justifies the right of its continued existence' (Rogers, 1963, p. 184).

Source: Authors' conceptualisation.

It is important to emphasise that the extracted data were presented with rich-text features, which played a crucial role in the data extraction process. Mulyanto, Hartati and Wardoyo (2022) argue that text feature extraction opens several ways to analyse data – from structured to unstructured – and is widely used in modern research studies. Rich-text features also improve classification accuracy, reduce data dimensionality, and remove irrelevant data in text classification (Pintas, Fernandes & Garcia, 2021). The definitions were presented in 9pt Arial font with regular font weight. The references for the definitions were formatted using the Harvard citation style.

To conduct a quality appraisal of the data (marketing definitions), the study used two key strategies: the inclusion of grey literature and the application of a six-step procedure for theoretical analysis. Grey literature – comprising theses, dissertations, conference papers, government reports, and policy papers – is often overlooked in computerised bibliographic databases. However, as Toronto and Remington (2020) suggested, it is a critical resource that provides access to a wealth of information, including innovative ideas not yet widely explored, thereby reducing publication bias (Gul *et al.*, 2021). In addition, the study used the six-step procedure for analysing theory, as Walker and Avant (2011) recommend, to critically evaluate the marketing definitions' quality. The primary aim of this procedure was to evaluate the data. The dimensions extracted from this analysis are detailed in TABLE 6.

**TABLE 6: SIX-STEP PROCEDURE FOR ANALYSING THEORY**

1	The origins or purpose of the definition	Evaluated definition for why it was developed, its assumptions, and supporting or conflicting evidence.
2	The meaning of the marketing definition, its concepts and statements	Evaluated the definition according to its key concepts, definitions, usage, interconnections, and relatedness to marketing.
3	The logical adequacy or structure of the marketing definition	The definition was assessed for logical coherence and its ability to make accurate predictions.
4	The usefulness of the marketing definition	The definition was evaluated according to its practical marketing value and potential to stimulate further research.
5	Generalisability or transferability of the marketing definition	This aspect allowed for an evaluation of the marketing definition's applicability to similar contexts, describing its scope and assessing how it simplifies marketing in several contexts or settings.
6	Testability of the marketing definition	Testability sought to determine how well the definition aligned with empirical data and how real-world evidence could substantiate it.

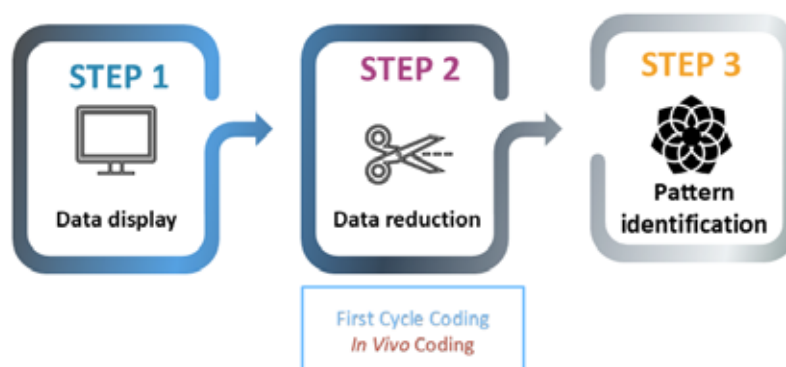
Source: Adapted from Walker and Avant (2011).

As shown in TABLE 6, the analysis of the marketing definitions was anchored in a six-dimensional framework, ensuring a thorough and multifaceted evaluation. Each definition was scrutinised for its origins, meaning, logical structure, practical utility, generalisability across contexts, and empirical testability. This rigorous approach confirmed the definitions' academic integrity and gauged their real-world applicability and potential to contribute to future research.

### STEP 5: CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

After conducting the literature search in step 4, a critical analysis and synthesis of the identified data (marketing definitions) were performed. At the outset, several measures were used to maintain rigour during the critical analysis and synthesis. First, a reflexive diary was used to record thoughts, intuitions, assumptions, revisions, problems, and decisions formulated during all the steps in the critical analysis and synthesis of the data. These analytical strategies enhanced the depth and comprehensiveness of the findings, thereby contributing to their rigour.

To aid in this step, the researchers adapted a process of critical analysis and synthesis suggested by Whittemore and Knafl (2005:551), resulting in the following process for analysing and synthesising the findings, as shown in FIGURE 2: data display, data reduction, and pattern identification. This study used *in vivo* coding, guided by Saldaña (2021), as part of the critical analysis and synthesis.

**FIGURE 2: A THREE-STEP PROCESS FOR ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS**

Source: Adapted from Whittemore and Knafl (2005:551).

#### Step 1: Data display

Using the process in FIGURE 2, step 1 (data display) involved visually presenting the marketing definitions in tables (see TABLE 7). Data display involves converting the extracted data from individual sources into a display that assembles the data from multiple primary sources around particular concepts or subgroups (Scagnoli & Verdinelli, 2017). The data display helped to organise the data to prepare for the next step (data reduction).

**Step 2: Data reduction (*in vivo* coding)**

Step 2 involved data reduction, simplifying and preparing data in a manageable framework (NSF, 2024). In TABLE 7, data reduction was used to simplify the definitions by focusing on key aspects of the definition ‘verbatim’ or *in vivo*. *In vivo* coding is a first-cycle coding technique that uses words or short phrases from the participants’ language in the data record as codes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2019). *In vivo* codes are ‘participant-inspired’ instead of ‘researcher-generated’ (Sigauke & Swansi, 2020). In some literature, this coding method is called literal, verbatim, inductive, indigenous, natural, or emic coding (Saldaña, 2016). This approach facilitated the extraction of critical concepts that captured the evolution of marketing across the IRs, as expressed by the ‘exact words or phrases’ used in the definitions of marketing. Following the guidance of Saldaña (2021), the extracted data (definitions of marketing) were coded *in vivo* to prioritise and honour the participants’ voices. Saldaña (2021) adds that researchers doing this are more likely to capture the meanings inherent in participants’ experiences. In the context of this study, the participants’ voices were represented verbatim by the elements of the marketing definitions between quotation marks and in capital letters. The data reduction process (*in vivo* coding) used rich-text features. Specifically, the text (*in vivo* codes) was displayed in capital letters, enclosed in quotation marks, and formatted in 9pt Arial font at regular weight, as exemplified in TABLE 7.

**Step 3: Pattern identification**

This last step involved summarising the key patterns that emerged from the analysis.

**FINDINGS**

TABLE 7 presents an example of the results of the *in vivo* coding of marketing definitions from 1960 to 2024. The results provide insight into the marketing discipline’s shifting paradigms, priorities, and practices as it adapted to technological advancements and changing business environments.

TABLE 7: AN EXAMPLE OF DATA REDUCTION DURING *IN VIVO* CODING OF MARKETING DEFINITIONS

Extracted data	Data reduction
Extracted definitions of marketing	First-cycle coding ( <i>in vivo</i> coding)
'Marketing is a customer focus that permeates organisational functions and processes and is geared towards making promises through value proposition, enabling the fulfilment of individual expectations created by such promises and fulfilling such expectations through support to customers' value-generating processes, thereby supporting value creation in the firm's as well as its customers' and other stakeholders' processes' (Grönroos, 2009).	'A CUSTOMER FOCUS' 'PERMEATES ORGANISATIONAL FUNCTIONS AND PROCESSES' 'GEARED TOWARDS MAKING PROMISES THROUGH VALUE PROPOSITION' 'ENABLING THE FULFILMENT OF INDIVIDUAL EXPECTATIONS' 'SUPPORT TO CUSTOMERS' VALUE-GENERATING PROCESSES' 'SUPPORTING VALUE CREATION' 'IN THE FIRM'S AS WELL AS ITS CUSTOMERS' AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS' PROCESSES'
'Marketing is the activities and value creation processes that facilitate exchanging offerings within the domain of business and benefit the society at large' (Liu, 2017).	'THE ACTIVITIES AND VALUE CREATION PROCESSES' 'FACILITATE EXCHANGING OFFERINGS' 'WITHIN THE DOMAIN OF BUSINESS' 'BENEFIT THE SOCIETY AT LARGE'
'Marketing is an organisational function that involves creating, communicating, and delivering value to consumers. Marketers create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that provide customers, partners, and society with value based on their specific needs' (Rosário & Dias, 2022).	'ORGANISATIONAL FUNCTION' 'CREATING, COMMUNICATING, AND DELIVERING VALUE TO CONSUMERS' 'CREATE, COMMUNICATE, DELIVER, AND EXCHANGE' 'OFFERINGS' 'PROVIDE CUSTOMERS, PARTNERS, AND SOCIETY' 'WITH VALUE' 'BASED ON THEIR SPECIFIC NEEDS'

Source: Authors' conceptualisation.

After completing the *in vivo* coding process, Saldaña (2021) advises researchers to visualise the findings using code landscaping, which combines textual and visual techniques to present findings (patterns) from the data (Gonzalez, 2016). In addition, O’Kane *et al.* (2022) posit that this process echoes the principles of tag clouds and cluster analysis found in computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, offering a manual yet systematic method for data organisation and preparation for analysis. As part of code landscaping, the study used word clouds, in which frequently occurring words or phrases from the data are displayed in larger font sizes, while less frequent terms appear smaller. Although Saldaña (2021) warns against relying solely on code frequency, code landscaping through word clouding remains an exploratory tool to identify potential themes. In our case, the word clouds aided in identifying potential codes, categories, and emerging concepts. Code landscaping using word clouding (Free Word Cloud Generator, 2025) resulted in the word cloud visualisations shown in FIGURE 3.

## 1970s



## 1990s



## 2010s



## 2020s



Source: <https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/>

**FIGURE 3: FIRST-CYCLE CODES PRESENTED THROUGH WORD CLOUDING: THE EVOLUTION OF MARKETING DEFINITIONS THROUGH THE DECADES**



It is important to discuss the findings of our ILR process. Thus, from the word clouds in FIGURE 3, we note that significant shifts across the 3IR and the 4IR have characterised marketing. We discuss these shifts in greater detail next.

## DISCUSSION

As shown in the word clouds (FIGURE 3), the most prominent terms that describe marketing in the 1960s were customer, needs, process, social, consumption, environment, and anticipating. FIGURE 3 shows that marketing in the 1960s focused on customer-centricity and economic exchanges. During this time, profit-driven motives became aligned with a customer focus, indicating that businesses prioritised meeting customer needs to achieve their profit objectives. This era also witnessed a growing recognition and applicability of marketing beyond commercial markets, laying the foundations for broader thinking about marketing in the future. One such discussion was the seminal work by Kotler and Levy (1969), which advocated broadening the scope of marketing. According to Kotler (2005), expanding marketing beyond commercial markets to include non-commercial organisations such as museums, performing arts groups, and churches was a prominent topic in the 1960s.

In the 1970s, customer-centricity and economic exchanges were the dominant focuses, highlighting marketing's strong ties to economics. This is evident in the definitions provided by Drucker (1979), Howards (1973, as cited in Gamble *et al.* 2011), and Star *et al.* (1977), where the primary focus is on understanding and fulfilling customer needs and preferences. Thus, marketing is dominantly focused on creating, stimulating, and satisfying customer needs and wants. Regarding its relationship with economics, Doyle (1976) reported that the 1970s experienced economic stagnation and accelerating inflation, creating a difficult marketing environment. This led to a sense of uncertainty and pessimism, contrasting with the optimism of the 1960s. Thus, targeted market segments or specific customers/constituents emerged to manage resources efficiently to achieve business objectives, with profit being the dominant objective.

In the 1980s, customer-centricity and economic exchanges were the dominant marketing patterns (see FIGURE 3). This shift in marketing strategies and practices highlighted the expanding role of the discipline in society. Webster (1992) observed that this decade was marked by significant organisational transformations driven by heightened global trade competition, which led to the development of adaptable business models. This competitive landscape prompted a deeper exploration of marketing, particularly in customer segmentation (Kotler & Armstrong, 2004). Gamble *et al.* (2011) also noted that this era witnessed a rise in social consciousness, exemplified by movements such as the 'green consumer movements' described by Tadjewski and Brownlie (2008:3); this trend was echoed by Brassington and Pettitt (2006).

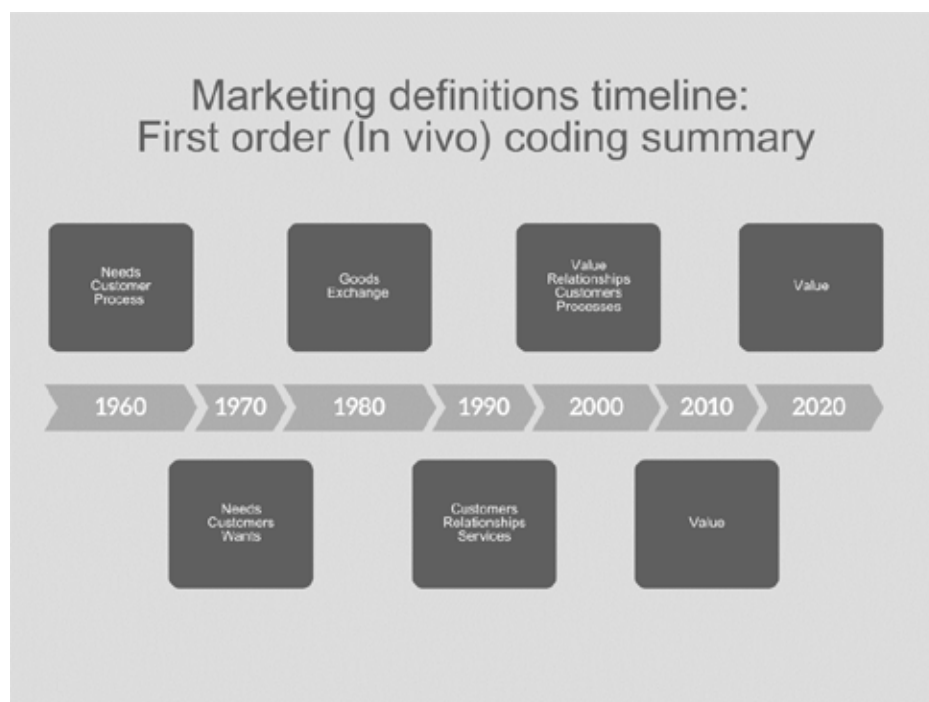
The 1990s were transformative for marketing, shaped by technological progress, changing consumer behaviours, and environmental awareness. This era introduced innovative strategies and refined traditional approaches to align with the new dynamics (Gamble *et al.*, 2011). Social, societal, strategic, value, and relationship marketing gained prominence alongside economic exchanges and customer-centricity. Wright and Webster's definitions emphasised targeting specific markets to develop profitable products that met their needs. Relationship marketing evolved significantly, resonating with Lynch's emphasis on continuous market adaptation to achieve a unique and enduring competitive edge.

In the 2000s, marketing shifted towards a deep understanding of customer needs, as evidenced by the dominance of patterns such as customer-centricity, value, and broadened marketing. The advancement of the Internet and digital technologies marked significant progress in the 2000s, placing e-commerce and innovation at the heart of marketing research (Groucutt, 2005). During this time, societal considerations gained prominence, with Brassington and Pettitt (2006:11) advocating definitions incorporating social and ethical concerns. Those concerns also rose to prominence, shaping marketing definitions (Brassington & Pettitt, 2006, p. 11). This era marked marketing's evolution from transactional exchanges to focusing on long-term relationships and personalisation, driven by data and technological capabilities.



In the 2010s, the concept of value and its creation processes became central to marketing, emphasising the role of marketing in enabling the joint creation of value through collaborative efforts and interactions. The focus was on customer orientation, with customer-centricity and value being key patterns. Societal marketing and systems thinking also appear to be notable patterns, suggesting their emerging significance in the marketing landscape. These ideas underscore how the focus on customer-centricity, exchange, and value defined the 2010s. The importance of nurturing relationships, achieving profitability, and marketing's broader influence on individuals and society were also recognised as critical.

In the 2020s, value and customer-centricity remain the dominant patterns. Marketing in the 2020s is characterised by a complex approach that integrates relationship marketing, value creation, and exchange in a broader societal and organisational context (Akaka, Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). İzmir (2021) and Rosário and Dias (2022) underscored the importance of building exchange-based relationships, delivering customer value, and communicating strategically to meet customer needs and impact society. Hyman and Kostyk (2022) expanded on this perspective, describing marketing as a social science that promotes sustainable well-being through multi-party exchanges.



**FIGURE 4: MARKETING DEFINITIONS TIMELINE: IN VIVO CODING SUMMARY**

Source: Authors' design.

FIGURE 4 illustrates a shift towards value along with the move into the 3IR and the 4IR. This visual representation highlights the progressive transition from focusing on processes and services to a more value-centred approach in marketing strategies. It is from FIGURE 4 that we propose the following definition of marketing: *'Marketing refers to all value co-creating activities among and to the benefit of multiple and interconnected actors in service ecosystems within evolving settings.'*

This definition highlights four critical concepts: value co-creation, exchange, the interconnectivity of multiple actors, and marketing dynamism in the 4IR. The subsections below explain these concepts operationally, beginning with value co-creation.

## **MARKETING IN THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION**

### ***Emphasis on value co-creation***

Consistent with service-dominant (S-D) logic, the above definition places value co-creation at the centre of all marketing exchanges. This assertion aligns with Kotler's (2020) view that the marketing discipline focuses on creating value. Furthermore, Takahashi and Takahashi (2022) explained that this value is co-created when actors engage in a series of exchange activities to achieve mutual benefits.

### ***Emphasis on exchange***

At the heart of the S-D logic is the idea that service is the foundation of exchange (Hunt, 2020; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2021) and that value is jointly created by and for multiple actors and their ongoing interactions through dynamic systems of exchange (Akaka et al., 2021). Although the study's definition of marketing does not explicitly mention 'exchange', that concept is implicit in the definition. Framing marketing as a collaborative process of value co-creation in a network of interconnected actors suggests that some form of exchange between multiple parties is occurring to facilitate this value co-creation. This exchange may involve trading resources, integrating services, sharing knowledge, or any other value transactions among the service ecosystems' interconnected actors. Therefore, the definition frames marketing as coordinating and managing value co-creating activities and interactions among multiple parties.

### ***Emphasis on the interconnectivity of multiple actors***

The phrase 'value co-creating activities among and to the benefit of multiple and interconnected actors' directly captures the notion of value being jointly created through collaborative activities involving various interconnected parties. The definition of marketing for the study positions marketing as facilitating these co-creation activities within service ecosystems, which reflects the S-D logic view that value emerges through the integration of resources and applied knowledge being shared among the network of actors (Hunt, 2020; Mir, Kausar & Kitchlew, 2021). Specifying these activities as occurring 'to the benefit of multiple and interconnected actors' reinforces that value co-creation involves mutual benefits and reciprocal value realisation for all parties involved, not just a one-way delivery to customers.

This perspective aligns with recent marketing definitions proposed by scholars such as Hyman and Kostyk (2022), İzmir (2021), Kotler (2020), and Rosário and Dias (2022). The inclusion of 'actors' in the definition reflects the 4IR's emphasis on connectivity and multifaceted interactions among diverse stakeholders, including customers, business partners, and suppliers (Vargo, Koskela-Huotari & Vink, 2020). This broadened scope extends marketing's application beyond traditional business contexts to non-profit, political, and social sectors. The multi-actor view of marketing in the 4IR is consistent with S-D logic, recognising the interconnected nature of individuals and organisations in networks and societies (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of value creation, acknowledging the contributions and interdependencies of multiple actors (Zheng et al., 2020). Such a perspective is crucial for managers navigating the complexities of marketing in the 4IR environment.

### ***Emphasis on marketing as a dynamic discipline***

The aspects of value co-creation, a multiplicity of actors, and the emphasis on multiple exchanges demonstrate that marketing constantly evolves in the 4IR. This dynamism can be attributed to technological changes, globalisation, and social change. Clark, Key, and Azab (2023) agree with Hunt et al. (2022) that shifts in marketing over the years are tied to the literature that describes marketing as a dynamic rather than a static discipline. In the face of a dynamic landscape, organisations' marketing systems must continually evolve and adapt to the interplay of relationships among actors in a network, as these interactions shape collective behaviour.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, METHODOLOGICAL THOUGHT, AND PRACTICE

Our study has demonstrated the value of using an ILR methodology in qualitative research, particularly in marketing. The ILR methodology has contributed significantly to qualitative methodological thought by showcasing a structured yet flexible approach to synthesising a diverse range of literature, accommodating both empirical and theoretical studies.

One key implication for future research is the potential expansion of ILR applications beyond definitional analyses to other complex, multi-faceted marketing phenomena. Future researchers may consider using ILRs to explore broader thematic areas such as consumer behaviour shifts in the digital age, sustainability marketing, and the intersection of artificial intelligence with traditional marketing paradigms. In addition, ILR could facilitate cross-disciplinary syntheses, offering new perspectives by integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and information systems.

From a methodological perspective, this study underscores ILR's role in advancing qualitative review techniques by combining systematic rigour with thematic synthesis. The ILR approach enhances methodological transparency and replicability through its structured five-step process. Incorporating tools such as the SPICE framework and the ALCOA criteria reinforces the robustness of ILR in qualitative inquiry, offering scholars a replicable model to ensure validity and reliability in literature reviews. Future methodological research could refine ILR by integrating emerging techniques such as text mining and machine learning to enhance literature screening and analysis processes.

With respect to practice, the ILR methodology provides marketing scholars and practitioners with an evidence-based foundation to inform decision-making. The ability to systematically track the definitional evolution of marketing across industrial revolutions offers practitioners actionable insights into emerging trends and shifts in market values.

Our study highlights ILR's potential to bridge gaps in the marketing literature, foster theoretical advances, and inform practice through a systematic, comprehensive, and qualitative synthesis of knowledge. Integrating ILR into mainstream marketing research methodologies could pave the way for more nuanced understandings of complex phenomena, fostering a more holistic approach to academic enquiry and industry application.

## LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The subjective interpretation of marketing definitions across different industrial revolutions also presents a difficulty, as evolving contexts may influence their meaning. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating empirical data and exploring various sources.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the value of the ILR methodology in analysing the evolution of marketing definitions across two industrial revolutions. Our contributions are twofold. First, through the application of ILR, this study not only provides a comprehensive synthesis of marketing definitions but also contributes to the advancement of qualitative methodological thought and practice, demonstrating ILR's effectiveness in capturing the complexity and evolution of marketing concepts. Second, our findings reveal key shifts in marketing thought, emphasising value co-creation and customer-centricity. By yielding a definition of marketing in the 4IR, our study contributes to calls to unify the lens of conceptualising marketing exchanges in line with the search for a unified marketing theory (Hunt *et al.*, 2022; Madhavaram & Hatfield, 2022; Varadarajan, 2022).

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