Journal of Business and Economic Options

Social Media Influence on Consumer Behavior Insights from Supermarket Shoppers in Lahore

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Abstract
With the widespread adoption of social media platforms and advancements in information technology, consumers now have unprecedented access to information and communication channels that influence their purchasing decisions. The study delves into this evolving dynamic by focusing on the Pakistani market, specifically examining consumer behavior in the context of shopping at large supermarkets in Lahore. By adopting a qualitative research approach, the study aims to capture the nuanced perceptions and behaviors of consumers regarding the use of social media and conventional media for obtaining shopping-related information. Through in-depth interviews with participants from diverse backgrounds, the study uncovers valuable insights into how consumers navigate and interact with different media channels in their shopping journey. Participants' perspectives shed light on the increasing significance of social media as a preferred source of information, surpassing traditional forms of media such as television, radio, and print. One of the key findings of the study is the pronounced influence of social media on shaping consumer attitudes, preferences, and purchase decisions. Participants highlight the interactive and immersive nature of social media platforms, which allow them to access real-time reviews, recommendations, and product information from their peers and influencers. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of businesses and marketers understanding and harnessing the power of social media to effectively engage with consumers and drive favorable outcomes. With social media becoming an integral part of consumers' shopping experiences, businesses must adapt their marketing strategies to leverage these platforms' potential for building brand awareness, fostering customer engagement, and driving sales. In light of these findings, the study recommends that businesses in Lahore and beyond prioritize their social media presence and invest in strategies that resonate with their target audience. By leveraging the reach and influence of social media channels, businesses can not only enhance their visibility and reputation but also cultivate meaningful relationships with consumers, ultimately driving positive outcomes for their brands.
Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Social Media, Conventional Media, Shopping Decisions, Supermarkets, Lahore
JEL Codes: D12, M31, O33, R11

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising serves as a powerful tool for businesses to communicate with consumers and persuade them to buy their products or services. Through various channels such as television, radio, print media, online platforms, and more, advertisers convey messages that highlight the features, benefits, and value propositions of their offerings (Kumar and Gupta 2016). At its core, advertising aims to capture the attention of target audiences and create awareness about a particular product or service. By showcasing how a product or service can address consumers' needs, solve their problems, or enhance their lives, advertisers seek to influence consumer behavior and drive sales. Moreover, advertising plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and preferences. Through strategic messaging, branding, and storytelling, advertisers can build strong brand identities and foster emotional connections with consumers (Confos and Davis 2016). This, in turn, can lead to brand loyalty and repeat purchases over time. The landscape of advertising has undergone significant changes with the rise of online media and social platforms. While print media still holds relevance, particularly in certain demographics and regions, online channels, including social media, have emerged as powerful tools for reaching and engaging audiences, regardless of geographical location. One notable impact of social media growth is the reduced control brand managers have over their brands' messaging and perception (Schivinski and Dabrowski 2016). Unlike traditional advertising channels where brands have more control over the content and timing of their messages, social media platforms allow for user-generated content, reviews, and discussions that can influence how a brand is perceived by the public.

Berthon et al. (2011) highlight this phenomenon, emphasizing how the interactive nature of social media platforms has shifted the power dynamics between brands and consumers. User-generated content, viral trends, and online conversations

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can significantly shape brand reputation and influence consumer attitudes and behaviors, often beyond the direct control of brand managers. As a result, brand managers must adapt their strategies to effectively engage with consumers in the digital realm, fostering authentic relationships, actively listening to feedback, and participating in online conversations. Building trust and credibility in the online space requires transparency, responsiveness, and a willingness to embrace the dynamic nature of social media interactions. Berthon et al. (2011) rightly emphasize the dual nature of social media content generation, highlighting how both corporations and users contribute to the discourse surrounding company and brand-related messages. Social media platforms serve as dynamic spaces where consumers can engage directly with companies, sharing their opinions, feedback, and suggestions in real-time.

For consumers, social media platforms offer a unique opportunity to interact directly with companies, enabling them to express their thoughts, concerns, and preferences openly. Whether through comments, reviews, or direct messages, consumers have a voice that can reach a wide audience, influencing brand perceptions and decisions. On the corporate side, engaging with consumers on social media is not only about broadcasting messages but also about actively listening and responding to customer feedback. Companies that effectively leverage social media as a two-way communication channel can strengthen relationships with customers, build brand loyalty, and gain valuable insights into consumer preferences and behaviors (Brown 2010). Moreover, the feedback provided by customers through social media channels serves as a rich source of information for corporations to improve their products and services. By listening to customer needs and addressing their concerns promptly and effectively, companies can enhance their offerings and stay competitive in the market. The effective utilization of social media platforms offers corporations a significant competitive edge, enabling them to enhance brand equity, cultivate a positive corporate reputation, and elicit favorable responses from stakeholders. As highlighted by Mangold and Faulds (2009), social media serves as a powerful tool for reaching and engaging with consumers who may not be regular consumers of traditional media channels such as television, newspapers, radio, and magazines.

One of the key advantages of social media is its ability to facilitate direct and personalized communication between corporations and their target audience. Through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, companies can tailor their messaging to specific demographics, interests, and preferences, thereby fostering deeper connections with consumers (Swani et al., 2014). Furthermore, social media allows corporations to humanize their brands and showcase their values, culture, and personality in an authentic manner. By sharing engaging content, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and user-generated stories, companies can build trust and credibility with their audience, ultimately strengthening brand loyalty and advocacy. Moreover, social media provides a platform for real-time feedback and conversation, enabling companies to quickly address customer inquiries, concerns, and feedback. By actively listening to their audience and responding promptly and transparently, corporations can demonstrate their commitment to customer satisfaction and continuous improvement. Additionally, social media offers valuable opportunities for corporations to amplify their marketing efforts through word-of-mouth referrals, influencer partnerships, and viral content (Cakim 2009). By leveraging the power of social sharing and user-generated content, companies can extend their reach and increase brand visibility organically.

The objective of this study is multifaceted, aiming to shed light on the role of media selection in achieving effective advertising outcomes. Firstly, it seeks to ascertain the significance of media selection in the overall success of advertising initiatives. By evaluating various media channels and their respective strengths and weaknesses, the study aims to provide insights into the optimal media mix for advertising campaigns. Furthermore, the study endeavors to compare the effectiveness of advertising through social media platforms with traditional media channels in promoting consumer products. Through empirical analysis and case studies, it seeks to determine whether social media advertising outperforms conventional media in terms of reach, engagement, and return on investment. Ultimately, the study aims to offer practical recommendations to the corporate sector and media agencies regarding the most efficient and effective media for advertising products and services. By synthesizing the findings into actionable insights, the study aims to inform strategic decision-making and resource allocation, enabling organizations to maximize the impact of their advertising efforts and achieve their marketing objectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Skype has revolutionized marketing communication practices, rendering conventional media channels less influential. With the widespread adoption of information and communication technology (ICT), consumers are increasingly inclined to spend a significant portion of their time online, engaging with the internet community. This shift in consumer behavior has propelled social media to the forefront of marketing communication strategies. Organizations recognize the immense potential of social media forums as powerful tools for engaging with their target audience, building brand awareness, and driving customer engagement. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms offer unparalleled opportunities for real-time interaction, feedback, and dialogue between brands and consumers. As highlighted by Winer (2009), the growing trend of online communication underscores the need for businesses to adapt their marketing strategies accordingly. By leveraging social media channels effectively, organizations can tap into the vast pool of online users, cultivate meaningful relationships with customers, and influence purchasing decisions in a dynamic and interconnected digital landscape.

Recognizing the significance of social media channels, corporations are increasingly embracing Web 2.0 technologies and leveraging various social media platforms to amplify their voice and engage with consumers. As highlighted by Berthon et al. (2012), the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies encompasses a broad spectrum of interactive and collaborative online tools and platforms that enable corporations to actively participate in the digital conversation. Through social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, corporations can create compelling content, share updates and announcements, and interact with their audience in real time. These platforms offer corporations unprecedented opportunities to humanize their brand, foster authentic connections with customers, and cultivate brand loyalty in an increasingly competitive marketplace. By embracing Web 2.0 technologies and social media channels, corporations can transcend traditional marketing boundaries and harness the power of user-generated content, viral marketing, and peer-to-peer recommendations to amplify their brand reach and influence. Moreover, by actively engaging with consumers on social media, corporations can glean valuable insights into consumer preferences, behaviors, and sentiment, enabling them to tailor their marketing efforts and product offerings to better meet the evolving needs and expectations of their target audience.

Indeed, a number of studies within brand management and marketing literature underscores the pivotal role of social media in corporations' communication strategies aimed at fostering positive consumer perceptions toward brands and influencing purchase intentions. Scholars such as Christodoulides et al. (2012), Smith et al. (2012), Taylor (2013), and Villanueva et al. (2008) have delved into the impact of both company-generated and user-generated content on social media platforms in shaping consumer behavior. These studies highlight how corporations leverage social media as a dynamic communication channel to cultivate brand affinity, engage with consumers on a more personal level, and stimulate favorable attitudes toward their brands. By disseminating compelling content, responding to consumer inquiries and feedback, and fostering two-way dialogue with their audience, corporations can nurture meaningful relationships with consumers and enhance brand loyalty over time. Moreover, the interactive nature of social media enables corporations to harness the power of user-generated content, such as customer reviews, testimonials, and user-generated videos, to amplify brand advocacy and influence purchase decisions. By empowering consumers to share their experiences and opinions with their social networks, corporations can leverage the authenticity and credibility of peer recommendations to drive brand awareness and preference among prospective customers. The research delves into the efficacy of a specific promotional tool, a magazine advertisement, in influencing consumer attitudes toward manufactured housing and its impact on dealer selection. By administering closed-ended questionnaires to two distinct non-random convenience samples – namely, actual buyers of manufactured housing units from five participating West Virginia dealers, identified as Shoppers – the study aims to gauge the effectiveness of advertising in shaping consumer perceptions and preferences in the context of the manufactured housing market.

The findings of the study suggest that promotional efforts, such as advertising in magazines like Designed Homes, can indeed have a positive impact on consumer attitudes and perceptions, even when initial sentiments toward the product category may be somewhat negative. Specifically, the research indicates that exposure to advertising materials may bolster consumers' predisposition to purchase manufactured homes by enhancing their attitudes toward the product. Furthermore, the study underscores the notion that consumers tend to report more favorable attitudes toward the dealer from whom they made their purchase, highlighting the influence of personal experience and transactional relationships on consumer perceptions. This finding reinforces the importance of building strong dealer-customer relationships and providing satisfactory purchasing experiences to foster positive brand associations and customer loyalty within the manufactured housing industry. Azad et al. (2005) shed light on the utilization of the internet as a medium for advertising, delving into various pertinent issues surrounding internet advertising. The article offers insights into the growth, impact, and characteristics of internet advertising, as well as its applications and associated challenges. Notably, the study adopts a descriptive approach, aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of internet advertising practices.

Drawing primarily on secondary sources, the study gathers relevant data pertaining to the growth, impact, characteristics, and applications of internet advertising from various sources including websites, published books, articles, and journals. Through a systematic analysis of the collected information, the researchers endeavor to fulfill the objectives outlined in the article. By synthesizing and examining the available literature on internet advertising, the study contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics and intricacies of this evolving advertising medium. It offers valuable insights for practitioners and researchers alike, facilitating informed decision-making and further exploration in the field of internet advertising. Kardes et al. (2012) introduced a consumer decision-making model that outlines a step-by-step process, beginning with problem recognition, followed by information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluations. Within this framework, social media emerges as a crucial tool in the information search phase, offering consumers access to a wealth of information in a relatively short period. This abundance of information enables consumers to compare different alternatives more effectively, thereby facilitating better purchase decisions. By elucidating the role of social media in the consumer decision-making process, Kardes et al. (2012). shed light on the evolving landscape of consumer behavior and the growing influence of digital platforms. Their model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how consumers navigate the marketplace and make informed choices in an era characterized by rapid technological advancements and increased connectivity.

Hansen et al., (2008) delved into the challenges posed by rising ad rates and banner blindness among internet advertisers, noting a slow but steady shift towards a novel advertising format: exposure to advertisements on printouts. This trend is

reflected in the efforts of various websites to incorporate advertisements into printer-friendly versions or stealthily insert them for print function users. To assess the effectiveness of these innovative approaches in cross-media advertising, a before-after study with group-control experimentation was conducted on 451 internet users. The study employed behavioral experiments to gauge recall of advertisements and advertisement messages, brand attitude, and purchase intention following exposure to internet and printout advertisements. Through a hypothesis-driven approach, the research explored the potential of the internet as an advertising medium and unveiled new avenues for advertisers, such as the emerging business opportunity of pay-per-print for website providers. An important implication for managers highlighted in the study is the importance of creating content that not only contains relevant keywords but also offers compelling information that users are inclined to print and engage with. By emphasizing the significance of engaging content, the study underscores the evolving landscape of online advertising and the need for innovative strategies to capture consumer attention and drive brand engagement.

Calder and Malthouse (2004) conducted a quantitative examination of the qualitative impact of newspapers on advertising effectiveness, revealing that the majority of reader experiences with newspapers are associated with advertising effectiveness. Their study demonstrated that when readers perceive newspapers as enhancing their knowledge, the effectiveness of advertisements within those newspapers increases. This finding was consistent across a representative sample of 101 newspapers among a national consumer base. The researchers conducted 100 in-depth interviews with readers, each focusing on a different newspaper, with 68 newspapers covered in total. Through this methodological approach, they identified that the experiences readers have with newspapers significantly influence the effectiveness of advertisements. Thirty-six out of 39 different newspaper experiences were found to be related to advertising effectiveness, with the remaining three experiences being negative. Their study concluded that newspapers which evoke strong experiences in readers tend to enhance the effectiveness of advertisements placed within them. Furthermore, the researchers anticipated a significant expansion in the availability of archived newspapers via the internet, facilitated by increased commercial and public investment. This expansion would enable researchers to access and analyze vast quantities of printed newspaper content more efficiently, thanks to the application of sophisticated software for text analysis.

De Meza and Webb (2004) conducted a study on the portrayal of public relations by the print media from 1980 through 1989, addressing a topic that had been controversial since the early 1900s but had received relatively little academic attention. Using an online search via the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, Meza obtained 58 articles from three prominent American newspapers: The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Los Angeles Times. These articles were then subjected to content analysis, resulting in categorization into three groups: favorable, unfavorable, and neutral. The findings revealed that the overall general image of the public relations profession portrayed by the print media during the specified period was unfavorable, with 46.5% of the coverage categorized as unfavorable and only 24.1% as favorable. However, Meza noted that while the general image was negative, most of the specific characterizations of public relations found in the articles were either favorable or neutral. Meza tentatively concluded that his study strengthened the argument that print media coverage of public relations tended to be antagonistic. He also highlighted the discrepancy between the general tone of coverage and the specific characterizations within the articles, suggesting a nuanced relationship between overall sentiment and specific portrayals of the profession.

Gao et al. (2002) acknowledged the growing significance of online advertising in marketing and advertising strategies, driven by factors such as global visibility, low-cost options, and effective performance tracking. As the internet user base expanded rapidly and e-commerce flourished, businesses and manufacturers increasingly turned their focus towards online advertising. Their paper aimed to provide a thorough exploration of online advertising, covering basic concepts, approaches, business models, and taxonomy. Additionally, they delved into engineering processes, technical challenges, and solutions related to various aspects of online advertising systems, including advertisement posting, tracking, targeting, and measurement. The authors conducted their research by considering six key variables and methods: content-based media, ISP-based approaches, portal-based strategies, ad serving mechanisms, ad-network operations, and ad trading businesses. Through their study, they presented a comprehensive taxonomy of online advertising, discussed different business models, classified online advertisements, and offered insights into the engineering processes and technical solutions essential for effective online advertising implementation. Krammer (2006) delved into the realm of web advertising, particularly focusing on formats like pop-ups and animated layer ads. These forms of advertising, while common, have increasingly been perceived as intrusive and disruptive by internet users. With the proliferation of extraneous content on the web and the absence of stringent regulations on intrusive advertising practices, Krammer (2006) examined the ramifications of ad blocking. In his work, Krammer (2006) explored the various advantages and disadvantages associated with ad blocking technologies. He delved into the different types of web advertisements prevalent at the time and analyzed their impact on user experience. Additionally, he likely discussed potential solutions or strategies to mitigate the negative effects of intrusive advertising on internet users' browsing experiences. Krammer (2006) research sheds light on the evolving landscape of web advertising and the challenges posed by intrusive ad formats, providing insights into how users and advertisers navigate this complex terrain.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an exploratory approach to investigate the impact of social and conventional media on consumer behavior regarding shopping at large superstores in Lahore, Pakistan. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study focuses on gathering and analyzing data through interviews. A sample of 10 respondents is selected for in-depth interviews to gain insights into their preferences and behaviors related to shopping at superstores. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of the influence of social media compared to conventional media on consumer decision-making processes. By employing qualitative research methods, the study aims to uncover nuanced perspectives and understandings of how social and conventional media channels shape consumers' perceptions and choices when it comes to shopping at superstores in Lahore. Through qualitative data analysis, themes and patterns emerging from the interviews can be identified, providing valuable insights into the role of media in consumer behavior in this context.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The qualitative approach employed in the study allowed for an in-depth analysis of the data, with particular emphasis placed on the responses provided by the majority of the respondents. The findings revealed several key reasons why respondents utilize supermarket social media platforms to gather information. Firstly, respondents highlighted the importance of promotions and discount advertisements available on these platforms. They noted that social media channels often feature promotional offers and discounts, which influence their decision-making process when considering purchases at supermarkets. Additionally, respondents emphasized the value of checking consumer comments and responses regarding supermarkets' products and promotions. Social media platforms provide a space for consumers to share their experiences and opinions, allowing others to gain insights into product quality and customer satisfaction. Moreover, respondents appreciated the convenience and efficiency of social media in providing maximum information in minimum time. They emphasized that social media platforms offer a wealth of information at their fingertips, enabling them to access relevant details quickly and easily. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the advantage of social media in facilitating price comparisons and aiding in making better decisions. They noted that social media platforms allow them to compare prices across different supermarkets, helping them identify the best deals and make informed purchasing choices.

The responses provided by the respondents shed light on their preference for using social media forums over conventional media channels to collect information. Many highlighted the abundance of information available on social media platforms, emphasizing their capability to provide a wide range of content for both online and in-person shopping needs. This comprehensive access to information was valued by respondents who sought detailed insights into products, promotions, and consumer feedback. Efficiency and time-saving emerged as significant factors driving the preference for social media. Respondents appreciated the convenience of quickly accessing information on social media platforms compared to traditional media channels. The ease of navigating through content and the ability to find relevant information swiftly were highlighted as key advantages of social media, ultimately saving time for individuals with busy schedules. Accessibility was another key aspect highlighted by respondents. Social media platforms were praised for their round-the-clock availability, allowing users to stay updated on the latest trends and promotions at any time of the day. This continuous access to information was particularly valued in a fast-paced consumer environment where staying informed is crucial.

Cost-effectiveness was a notable consideration for respondents, with many acknowledging the perceived lower costs associated with social media advertising compared to conventional media. The ability to access valuable information at a lower cost made social media an attractive option for individuals seeking to make informed purchasing decisions without breaking the bank. Respondents also noted the broader coverage and relevance of social media content compared to traditional media channels. They appreciated the tailored nature of social media advertising, which often aligns more closely with their interests and preferences. This relevance factor was seen as a significant advantage, particularly in a landscape where personalized content is highly valued. Demographic factors played a role in shaping preferences, with social media usage being more prevalent among younger and more educated respondents. These individuals, who were often more familiar with information communication technologies (ICT), gravitated towards social media platforms for their shopping-related information needs. Their preference for branded and high-quality products further reinforced the relevance of social media as a platform for accessing information that aligns with their preferences and values.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research delves into the comparative influence of social media and conventional media on consumer behavior within the context of Pakistan. Specifically, the study focuses on consumer behavior pertaining to shopping activities in large supermarkets located in Lahore, a major city in Pakistan. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study aims to explore and understand how consumers interact with different media channels, particularly social media platforms, in the context of their shopping experiences. By utilizing qualitative research methods, such as interviews or focus groups, the study seeks to gather rich and detailed insights directly from consumers. These insights can provide valuable understanding into the factors influencing consumer decision-making processes, including the role played by social media and conventional media channels. Through qualitative analysis, the study aims to uncover patterns, themes, and motivations underlying consumer behavior in the context of supermarket shopping.

The study's findings underscore the significance of social media as a pivotal and efficient source of information, particularly when compared to conventional media, in shaping consumer shopping behavior. Social media platforms offer consumers enhanced opportunities to compare prices and make more informed decisions regarding their purchases. When respondents were queried about their preference for utilizing social media forums over conventional media for information gathering, the predominant responses emphasized the convenience and effectiveness of social media. Many expressed a preference for social media platforms due to their ability to provide comprehensive information for both online and in-person shopping endeavors. The findings of the research underscore the significant role that social media plays in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in the context of shopping at large supermarkets in Lahore, Pakistan. By providing a platform for real-time interaction, social media enables consumers to access a wealth of information at their convenience, allowing them to make informed decisions about their purchases. This accessibility and immediacy set social media apart from conventional media channels, which may have limited coverage and less up-to-date content. Moreover, the study's qualitative approach allowed for a deeper exploration of consumer attitudes and preferences regarding media consumption.

Through interviews with respondents, the research revealed a preference for social media platforms due to their ability to offer comprehensive information, quick access, and cost-effectiveness. These insights shed light on the evolving media landscape in Pakistan and the growing influence of digital channels on consumer behavior. In light of these findings, businesses operating in the retail sector can benefit from leveraging social media as part of their marketing strategies. By actively engaging with consumers on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, supermarkets can not only disseminate promotional offers and product information but also foster meaningful interactions with their target audience. This proactive approach to social media marketing can help enhance brand visibility, build customer loyalty, and ultimately drive sales. Overall, the research underscores the importance of recognizing the evolving role of social media in influencing consumer behavior and the need for businesses to adapt their marketing efforts accordingly. Embracing digital channels as integral components of marketing strategies can position organizations for success in today's dynamic marketplace, particularly in the retail sector where consumer preferences and purchasing habits continue to evolve.

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