

The Influence of Social Media on Consumer Online Shopping Intention

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Abstract

Modern technology has changed the way people communicate, and social media, in particular, has changed people's behavior. With technological advancements, people are changing the ways of purchasing goods and services, and this study examines the impact of social media on consumers' online purchase intentions vis-à-vis social media. The study mainly focuses on the social media influence on consumer decision making process on online purchasing via Facebook. It is a quantitative study conducted with 283 respondents, and the data analysis is done using the SPSS software. The survey data is used to test the hypotheses drawn based on the findings of previous studies. The findings show that marketers should focus on the influence of social media on their customers, and that the online purchase intention is significantly influenced by social media. It also highlights the mediating factor of consumer engagement. This study thus fills the knowledge gap in online purchase intentions, and the results will support organizations and marketers to focus more on social media campaigns. Future studies should focus on the qualitative aspects of social media influence on online shopping intent to get deeper insights.

Keywords: Consumer Decision Making, Social Media, Digital Marketing, E-Commerce, Advertising, Marketing

INTRODUCTION

With the latest technological advancements, people opt for online options for all purposes including shopping for products and services. In fact, emerging trends have made massive changes to marketing and business prospects (Wirtz, 2016), and online platforms are important for this development. Further, it has been observed that social media will be the deciding factor for future marketing activities (Warsame et al., 2021). With these trends, it is important to investigate the positive and negative impact of social media on consumer activities. Hence, the present study aims to gain insights into social media and consumer interactions.

Customer interaction is vital for businesses as one person can interact with millions to promote the product and business, and receive feedback (Alalwan, 2018). Since it enabled communication between consumers and marketers in a new aspect, social media interference made massive changes in the marketing field. Therefore, the organic reach of social media content is more important than regular advertisements due to the latest developments in social media algorithms. (Amarasinghe et al., 2022).

Consumers become participants in businesses rather than observers, and they act as real stakeholders because they contribute to the development and improvements in organizations (Dahl, 2014). In fact, the emergence of new technology and the communication medium changed consumers' attitude as they became contributors of businesses (Evans & Erkan, 2014). Evidently, the brand owners wanted to connect rapidly with their consumers via these new communication mediums (Kanje et al., 2020). Moreover, owing to new digital communications and marketing approaches, the consumers and the brands connect transcending limitations like time, location etc., which enabled two-way communication to replace one-way communication (Kanje et al., 2020). The usage of social media, for instance, drastically changed the way people communicate and interact, which impacted Sri Lankan Communication structures as well. According to Digital Sri Lanka (2022) the most widely used social media in Sri Lanka in 2022 was Facebook, and it is reported that 6 million user accounts were created on Facebook in the year 2020 alone and the trend keeps increasing

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(Hewage & Weerasekera, 2020). Further, Meta advertising resource of Facebook mentions that there were 7.15 million accounts in Sri Lanka in 2022, and that 41.2 % population is eligible for Facebook usage. Kanje et al. (2020) identified entertainment, trendiness, interaction, and word of mouth as the popular components in Facebook marketing. Since social media is highly involved with texts, images, audiovisuals, and web links that can be shared with the users, it is richer than any other traditional medium (Chawla & Chodak, 2021). At present, social media is used by everyone, especially the younger generations, for a variety of purposes including entertainment, work, interaction and personal relationships, which enables them to choose their products via social media platforms. These individuals trust social media marketing as they can compare and make decisions before making purchases (Chawla, 2021).

The background study shows that it is important to analyze the influence of social media on consumer decision making in Sri Lanka. As most of the extant social media related studies focus on specific industries or general aspects (Jayasuriya & Azam, 2017; Lane et al., 2004; Rathnayake & Lakshika, n.d.), the present study examines the impact of social media on the consumer purchasing intention in online platforms in Sri Lanka. At the same time, the study also evaluates the mediating factor, i.e., customer engagement on content between social media marketing and the consumer decision making process. This fills the knowledge gap in the online shopping patterns in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study is organized to identify the importance of social media campaigns and the importance of the content engagement factor on social media contents. This knowledge can be used for social media campaigns for a variety of brands and products.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section contains a comprehensive review of literature on social media and consumer decision making as well as customer engagement. Then, the hypothesis is developed based on the literature, and the following section discusses the methodology used. It is followed by the sections presenting the data analysis, findings, and conclusions of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Katz and Blumer's Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) (1974), used by traditional media to analyze consumer behavior, is used as the main theoretical framework of this study. With the latest inventions like blogging, instant messaging, and social media platforms, the same theory can also be applied for evaluating social media platforms and marketings as shown in Figure1 (Moore, 2012).



Figure1: Uses and Gratification Social Media Model

Source: Communication Theories (year)

According to the theoretical consideration of this study, it is important to consider that the media choice belongs to the consumers, and the consumer is active and conscious of their choice. These choices are also determined by their personal interest to engage or use social media content. Therefore, content engagement is important for the current distribution of social media advertisements.

Content engagement and the informativeness of social media content provide the base for this study, and

so, this theory can be included directly in this study. Since the media and content choice are object oriented and value focused (Maia, 2018), the theory also assumes that the consumers' gratification decides the media selection and the content selections, and the consumers' needs will be supported by gratification (Ref?). Social media enables the consumers to connect with brands in the same way they deal with their friends, and this is a main factor to consider when studying consumer engagements with brands (Rosetta, 2014). For instance, a post may relate to the consumer by gratifying their needs, and the consumers will engage with it by commenting, liking or sharing the post (Sally & Wickramasinghe, 2020). Also, the caption and the content of the post play a major role in consumer engagement of Facebook posts (Sari, 2022).

The Users Gratification Theory (UGT) is used in various social media studies to understand the uses and motives behind social media usage and to understand the factors involved in consumer engagement on social media platforms (Pjero & Kercini, 2015; Rosetta, 2014). Therefore, The model is used to understand and develop the hypothesis of this study in order to investigate engagement, brand loyalty, content and social media advertising (Goodman, 2016; Wu, 2016). The UGT model can be applied to both traditional and novel media, and according to the literature, it can be used for digital media as well.

Social Media Marketing

Social media is defined as a wide range of internet-based applications that facilitate creation and sharing of user generated content (Alalwan, 2018). With technological advancement, social media is being used as a communication medium in most scenarios as well as for discussing goods, ideas, and brands among friends (Liu et al., 2018).

As mentioned earlier, social media marketing advancement enabled various organizations to connect with everyone by eliminating differences such as time and geographical location. It is spontaneous as they can broadcast to a wider global audience irrespective of the place of origin. This allowed brands and organizations to establish direct connections with customers and the retailers. This transition was both swift and convenient for most of the people since most of the youth are on social media almost all the time. Recent studies show that the global usage of social media increased exponentially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Ahmad & Zahid, 2020). Social media enabled the sellers to use rich media content like audios, videos, and images to attract their consumers (Spiller & Hettche, 2014).

Moreover, social media enables people to create profiles and to share content including images, video, and web links and to connect with their friends, colleagues, and relatives (Waheed & Jianhua, 2018). Since this is a trend among most youngsters, strategic marketers increasingly use social networking platforms to advertise their brands and ideas.

Social Media Usage and Consumer Online Purchase

Hoyer and MacInnes (2010) state that the decision-making process for purchasing has five stages, namely, "need recognition", "information search", "evaluation of alternatives", "decision-making" and "post-purchase evaluation" (p. 12). These stages are now connected with social media as social media seems to influence all decisions and interests nowadays. During the consumer decision making process, people are influenced by several external factors too.

The first stage, i.e., needs recognition, is all about identifying the specific product or service that will solve the problem the consumers have (Warsame et al., 2021). According to Mirabi et al., (2015), factors such as advertisement, quality, and brand may change the purchase intention of a person.

In the information searching stage, people search for alternatives and compare their selections to finalize the decision. Since, the latest trend is to use the Internet for this search (Maia, 2018), consumers tend to use online platforms to get the information in person (Pastierová, 2022).

Since social media usage has an impact on each action by the users, online purchases, too, may be influenced by the content and advertising via social media. To examine its impact, the following hypothesis is derived:

H1: Social media usage positively influences and impacts the consumer online purchase intention.

Content Engagement and Consumer Online Purchase Intention

A person's emotional or physical presence with the brand or organization can be identified as customer's content engagement (Beuker, 2009). Consumer brand loyalty and trustworthiness of the content could be the primary reasons for content engagement (Barhemmati & Ahmad, 2015), and content engagement will impact electronic word of mouth (E-WOM).

The more engaged consumers are, the more loyal they are to the brand, and therefore, marketers should focus on content engagement related content (Evans & Erkan, 2014). Further, the images, captions and the content can be a reason for content engagement (Sari, 2022). To increase consumer engagement, most brands are focusing on the organic reach for their product and the brands so that the available algorithms will not impact the reach of the product to the people.

Social media algorithms focus more on content engagement posts rather than a general distribution of advertisements and posts. The following hypothesis is derived from the fact that social media content relates to content engagement:

H2: Content engagement has a positive impact on the consumer purchase intention.

Mediating Role of Content Engagement

It has been observed that social media users are addicted to them and expect likes and comments all the time to confirm their presence on social media. This trend influences the brands to have the same goal, which involves the organic reach of their posts (Alalwan, 2018). Consumers consider social media advertisements as a source of information to get details about the brands and the products they advertise. From here, the purchase intention is the exact point of consumer engagement with the advertisements (Kanje et al., 2020).

About 53% of social media users are active observers and with time, it is expected that most of them will become content contributors as well (Ngai et al., 2015). According to Digital Sri Lanka 2022, a total of 61.5% of Internet users are using Facebook and are eligible to receive Facebook ads. Extant studies have focused on a product or industry when examining the nexus between social media and purchase intention, but this study is designed to understand the consumers' online purchase intention regardless of product or industry.

As established earlier, increased content engagement is a positive outcome of social media, and with the knowledge gained, the consumer may impact the social media content. According to the literature, content engagement is a deciding factor in the consumer decision making process (Ref?).

H3: Content engagement mediates between social media usage and consumer purchase intention.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

It was evident from the literature review that social media has an impact on people's attitudes and that there may be an impact on consumer online purchase intention as well. On the other hand, with the latest changes, organic post reach is more valuable than the general advertising processes on social media platforms. Here, content engagement is considered as an important factor to evaluate the social media content reach with the latest algorithm improvements.

By considering the above facts, it is important to analyze the relationship between the independent variable, i.e., social media, and the dependent variable, i.e., consumer online purchase intention. Content engagement is the mediating variable that is used to check the impact of content engagement on consumer decision making.

The following conceptual framework (see Figure: 2) is proposed for this study.

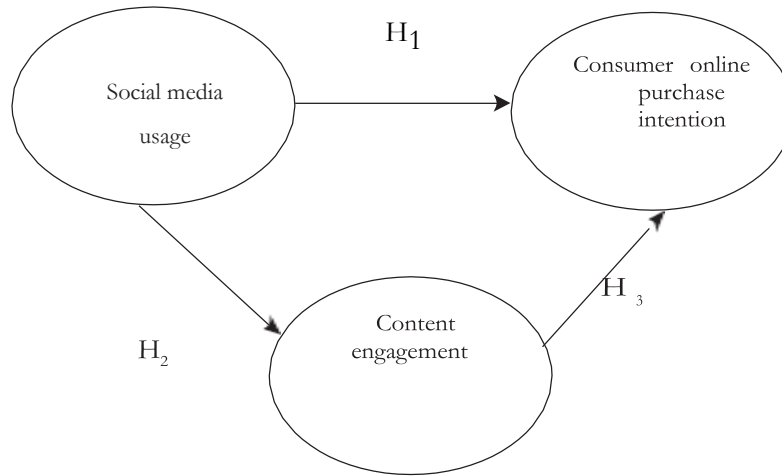


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Source: Created by the author (add year)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study takes a quantitative approach under the positivist research philosophy. Hence, the research was based on the author generated hypotheses, and deductive methodology was used. The data collection was carried out under the following guidelines.

The data required for the study were collected via a questionnaire consisting of questions with a five-point Likert scale. Other than the demographic details, 4 questions were prepared for each variable which resulted in a total of 12 questions. The goal of the study was to investigate the social media influence on consumers' purchase intention and to analyze the influence of the mediating factor consumer content engagement on the above relationship.

Convenience sampling method was used to gather the data from Facebook users. According to research and Digital 2022 reports, the number of Facebook users in Sri Lanka was above 7.1 million in 2022. Since it was not practical to collect data from all of them, the convenience sampling method was used in this study. Accordingly, 415 questionnaires were distributed among the respondents in the sample, and 283 responses were received for the study.

Study Design

The above-mentioned survey was done to test the hypotheses of this study and data were collected via an online questionnaire. Respondents' demographic data were collected with their consent, which was followed by the main questions with a five-point Likert scale.

Instrument

Each construct was developed with seven items and was adopted by referring to the extant literature. The survey was carried out in English to make it understandable for both Sinhala and Tamil respondents. Also, a pilot study was done to validate the questionnaire before the actual data collection process.

Analysis

The study used SPSS v 26 and AMOS to analyze the data, and the structural equation modeling was prepared to test the hypotheses.

Demographics of Participants

Out of the 415 questionnaires distributed, 283 responses received which signified 68% response rate. Over

50% of the respondents belonged in the age group between 13 and 33 (60.1%). Overall, there were more male respondents (64%) than female respondents (36%). Further, most respondents were undergraduates (57.2%) while 15.9% had postgraduate qualifications (see Table1).

Table1: Demographics

Variable		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	181	64.0
	Female	102	36.0
Age	13-19	45	15.9
	20-26	64	22.6
	27-33	61	21.6
	34-39	31	11.0
	40-46	31	11.0
	47-53	38	13.4
	54-60	9	3.2
	61 Above	4	1.4
	Qualification	O/L	4
	A/L	22	7.8
	Diploma	22	7.8
	HND	28	9.9
	Undergraduate	162	57.2
	Postgraduate	45	15.9

Source: Survey data (add year)According to the data, most respondents used Facebook which tallies with the findings of the extant studies (Kemp, 2015), and the Digital Sri Lanka report (2022).

RESULTS

Reliability Tests

A reliability test was done to check the requirement.

Table 2: Reliability test

Constructs	Total Response	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social media	283	4	0.823
Engagement	283	4	0.726
Purchase intention	283	4	0.803

Source: Survey Data (add year) As shown in the above table (Table 2) the values of engagement on social media are greater than 0.7, and so, these results can be accepted. Also, purchase intention is more than 0.8, which can be considered a good scale.

As shown in the diagram below (see Figure 3), the measurement model was created using Amos and the model FIT was checked, and the following accepted range values were observed: CFI 0.946 (>0.9), RMSEA is 0.076 (<0.08), Chi-Square 2.624, with p value 0.000.

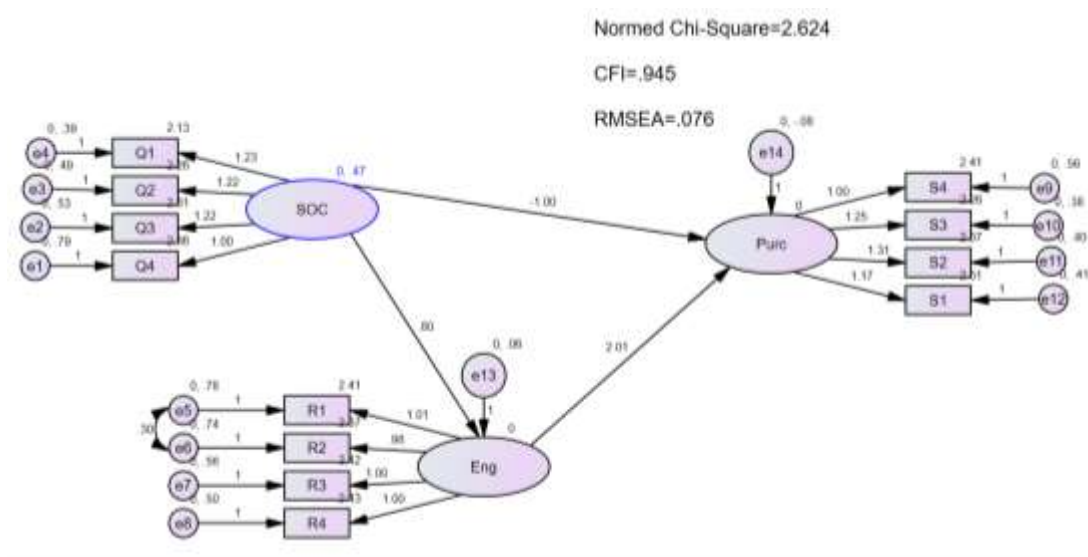


Figure 3: Amos Results

Source: Research data (add year)

Considering the Mediation

Utilizing the Andrew and Hayes procedure, the mediation effect of consumer engagement was also checked along with the direct effect.

It was revealed that the independent and dependent connection was significant. The independent variable, and the mediator should have significance. At the same time, the mediator and the dependent variable should also be significant. Further, a significant reduction of the mediator should also be visible to accept the mediation testing.

All these conditions were satisfied and the detailed conceptual diagram by the mediating factor is shown in the below diagram.

Hypothesis Test

Table 3: Hypothesis test

Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.278	.102		12.579	.000
	S. media- purchase	.489	.042	.573	11.712	.000
	Engage-purchase	.709	.044	.695	16.222	.000
	S. media-engage	.600	.035	.715	17.165	.000

Source: Research data (add year)

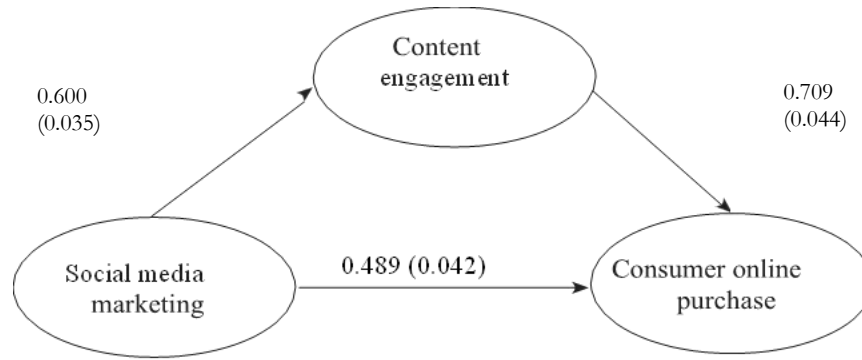


Figure 4: Conceptual diagram

Source: Created by the author (add year)

The hypothesis test shows that the values are in the accepted range with a significance less than the 0.05 level and the t value is greater than +2 for all the chances provided in the table (Table 3 and Figure 4).

Multicollinearity Test

Table 4: Multicollinearity test

Model		Coefficients ^a					Collinearity Statistics	
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
		B	Std. Error	Beta				
1	(Constant)	1.278	.102		12.579	.000		
	S. Media	.489	.042	.573	11.712	.000	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Purchas

Source: Research data (Add year)

Table5: Collinearity test

Collinearity Diagnostics ^a					
Model	Dimension	Eigenvalue	Condition Index	Variance Proportions	
				(Constant)	S. Media
1	1	1.932	1.000	.03	.03
	2	.068	5.330	.97	.97

a. Dependent Variable: Purchas

Source: Research data (add year) As shown in the above results (Table 4 and Table 5), multicollinearity does not exist as the VIF<5.0 and Tolerance>0.2, eigenvalue is not closer to zero and the condition index is less than 15.

Mediation Test

The median was checked with the Sobel test and the calculation shows that there is a mediation between social media and online purchase intention (Table 6).

Table 6: Mediation test

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error		
S. Media- Purchase	.489	.0362	11.741	.000

Source: Research data (2023)

DISCUSSION

The research was conducted to understand the relationship among social media influence, consumer online shopping and customer engagement with the content. From the results, it could be understood that the consumer content engagement plays an important role in the online purchasing intention in Sri Lanka. The results also show the importance of consumer engagement with posts and highlight the significance of social

media marketing for consumer online purchasing engagement.

The findings of this study also revealed that social media marketing has a positive impact on the online purchase intention of consumers in Sri Lanka. This also indicates that the electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) can be used via social media to influence the Sri Lankan online consumers.

These interactions may indirectly influence people to buy online products. It supports the studies conducted in western countries (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Social media platforms including Facebook can create content to attract the consumers in Sri Lanka to purchase online, and their intention towards online purchasing is boosted with social media campaigns. In this context, organic Facebook post reach is important for the brands and organizations to continue their business and to increase the content engagement.

As mentioned in previous studies (cite a couple of those studies here), social media marketing relates to consumer engagement. The time people spend on social media is increasing, and simultaneously, communication is getting richer due to the latest technological implementations on social media, which impacts information search and product/service discussions and knowledge sharing. This trend is also a reason for the information search and decision-making based on social media.

New technologies enable marketers and influencers to share rich content like videos, images, and other animations to attract consumers, thereby increasing consumer engagement. The consumers who connected through social media marketing may relate to the brand emotionally. Thus, social media has enabled marketers to market the products and services to a wide range of customers without any limitations and the consumers get the chance to share their experiences about the brands.

According to Rosetta (2014), the engagement of content positively impacts purchase intentions, and most of the consumers stay with the familiar brands even when they get some bad experiences occasionally. The findings of this study also support the above finding as the data revealed that the engagement positively impacted the consumer purchase intentions. Emotional attachment is a key factor in consumer engagement, and it can improve the purchase intention of any person.

Positive word of mouth is a key factor in consumer attachment and purchases (Barhemmati & Ahmad, 2015). In a study conducted in Pakistan, Anam and Faiz (2016) stated that consumer happiness and satisfaction can be achieved by online connectivity, and this in turn will improve consumer loyalty.

The present study also supports the argument that the media environment can easily educate the consumer about the brand and this will support the brand to get loyal consumers. Not only friends and family but also strangers on social media can influence the consumers by sharing their product/service experiences. As the number of people connected through the online environment is increasing (Kemp 2015), social media marketing can support the viral marketing aspect of the brands. Consumer engagement is one of the key factors affecting consumer purchases, and it is shown in the framework as a mediating factor.

This outcome also supports the observation that social media influences consumer engagement and purchasing intention, and so, organizations can give more importance and attention to their social media contents. Moreover, people's willingness to comment and share social media content also influences the consumer purchase intention, and it shows that consumers' interest is also a key factor determining social media interactions.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study resonate the findings of the extant studies in many ways. First, based on the outcomes of this study, the consumer purchase intention and social media marketing connectivity are clearly understood. In a world dominated by technological advancements, the usage of the Internet is rapidly increasing and Sri Lanka is no exception.

This trend has directly influenced the social media usage in the country according to the reports (Ref?), and this study examined the Sri Lankan online shopping context, where these outcomes can be directly applied to improve businesses.

As the extant literature and reports (Ref? cite a few of them) state, the usage of Facebook is high in Sri Lanka and this affects every industry. There are only a limited number of studies on the influence of social media, and no studies on online shopping with exclusive reference to the Sri Lankan context. The present study bridged this gap, and its findings revealed that organizations need to understand the importance of social media interaction and that social media content and engagement of consumers can create the purchase intention of the consumers.

Unlike the previous studies, this study focused on businesses to identify the importance of social media for consumer online purchase intentions. The results show that Sri Lankan marketers should thoroughly understand the role of consumer engagement in purchase intention vis-à-vis social media. Social media marketing communication can improve the purchase intention, and so, companies can reap the benefits of these actions. The engagement with the page should be increased to build loyal customers, and for this, the companies need to take additional steps to provide their consumers the platforms for mentioning their experiences. Further, the companies can provide customer support through the system to build these relationships. Evidently, consumer's buying intentions can be influenced by Internet-based mediums such as social media and websites. Therefore, business organizations can consider consumer feedback and improve their Internet marketing methods to improve their business.

Additionally, as social media environments allow users to freely and directly contact one another regardless of time, subject, frequency of discussion, or location, marketers must come up with activities that may interest users in the virtual world. In fact, it is essential to approach this flexibility provided by social media platforms with more openness. If all of these are successful, marketers working for individual businesses will soon be able to understand how to mold customer communication so that it is compatible with the objectives and strategies of the respective businesses.

Limitations

The research followed a quantitative approach to get an overview of the study area. However, a qualitative study may generate more insights. Also, external influences like the Covid-19 pandemic, recommendations of experts, and experience sharing factors were not considered in this study.

The study did not consider the cultural differences among the different races, religious groups, and regions, which is another limitation of the present study.

Future Directions

Although this study has important theoretical implications, it has some drawbacks as well. Closed-ended questions were used for this survey and the data gathered via the questionnaire can be improved via interviews to gain a holistic and in-depth understanding about the consumer aspects in future studies. Also, in this study, the e-WOM was not studied in-depth, and its impact should be analyzed further.

Finally, to get more insightful data for businesses, additional demographic parameters can be used, and research that includes additional variables in addition to customer involvement should be taken into consideration. Future research can be directed towards addressing the specific contents in social media to get more insights about the relationship.

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