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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ON PURCHASING DECISIONS

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of social media on consumer behavior and purchasing decisions. A survey was conducted among students at the University of Skopje as respondents, to gather insights into their social media usage, content preferences, and perceptions of brand engagement on these platforms. The findings reveal that social networking sites like Instagram and Facebook are extensively utilized, with the majority of respondents spending significant time on these platforms daily. Moreover, a considerable percentage of respondents reported making purchase decisions based on posts or advertisements encountered on social media, indicating its impact on consumer purchasing behavior. The perception of brands engaging with users on social media was predominantly positive among respondents. Videos emerged as the most engaging content type, followed by images, highlighting the importance of visual content in driving consumer engagement. These findings underscore the significance of social media as a marketing tool and its potential to influence consumer behavior. Marketers should leverage these platforms effectively to connect with consumers, deliver targeted messages, and drive purchasing decisions.

Keywords: Facebook, Instagram, brand communication, online purchasing

JEL classification: M10; M21; L20

INTRODUCTION

Social media have become increasingly integral to the daily routines of Internet users. A growing number of individuals have turned to social media platforms not only for communication but also for engaging with brands. With the significant expansion of social media in recent years, companies have capitalized on its potential to drive sales and foster customer relationships. There exists a wealth of research on the correlation between online networks and consumer purchasing decisions, indicating that social media (Aleh, 2020) influences approximately 71% of purchasing choices. This underscores the substantial impact of social media on consumer decision-making processes.

This study aims to investigate the influence of online social networks on customer purchasing decisions, particularly how individuals engage with and gather information from social media platforms before making a purchase. Various theoretical frameworks are employed to underpin the research, including concepts such as social media and the stages of decision-making, supported by pertinent scholarly literature. Moreover, these theories seek to elucidate the interplay between social media and consumer behavior in

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everyday life. The methodology used in this research is quantitative, survey based towards students to explore the extent to which people rely on social media platforms, the timing of their engagement, and the impact of their usage during the purchasing decision.

This study offer valuable insights into the complex relationship between social media usage and purchasing preferences, highlighting the significant role that social media platforms play in shaping consumer behavior and influencing purchasing decisions.

The subsequent sections of the study are structured as follows: Section 1 outlines the review of existing literature. Section 2 elucidates the research design and data collection and presentation. Section 3 encompasses empirical analyses. The final section delivers concluding remarks, limitations and suggestion for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Technologies and the internet have revolutionized the sharing of information and expertise, ushering in new modes of communication (Evans, 2010). Among these, social media stands out as the most prevalent form of interaction (Stelzner, 2010). Social networking sites have emerged as novel platforms for interpersonal engagement, reshaping individuals' behaviors, expectations, and business practices (Wollan et al., 2011). These platforms offer users a convenient means to connect and converse with others, empowering millions to voice their opinions and share experiences with a global audience at little to no cost (Trusov et al., 2009).

Social media is described as a digital platform facilitating the discovery of new information, idea sharing, and connections with individuals or organizations (Maya, 2021). Its emergence has fundamentally altered contemporary lifestyles, significantly enhancing communication accessibility (Zaryn, 2013). This medium enables the exchange of user-generated content, including data, images, and videos (Tahir, 2020).

Regarding the types of social media, the sheer multitude of platforms available today makes it challenging to ascertain their exact number. Consequently, social media has been categorized based on its diverse purposes. Content-sharing platforms, particularly those focused on visual media, have become integral to brand marketing strategies, enabling companies to leverage images and videos as effective marketing tools to enhance brand awareness among customers. Social media sharing sites, in particular, have gained prominence as consumers increasingly gravitate towards visually appealing content over lengthy textual descriptions when learning about products.

Instagram and Facebook, has emerged as a prominent social networking platform in contemporary society. However, Instagram distinguishes itself by prioritizing visual content, placing a strong emphasis on photos and videos. It functions more as a photo-sharing application, offering users a visually immersive experience and allowing brands to connect with consumers through compelling visual storytelling.

The visual-centric nature of Instagram makes it an ideal platform for brands looking to showcase their products in an engaging and aesthetically pleasing manner. Through captivating images and videos, brands can effectively communicate their message, showcase product features, and evoke emotions, thereby resonating with their target audience and driving engagement. Moreover, Instagram's user-friendly interface and extensive reach make it a powerful tool for brands seeking to increase brand visibility and foster meaningful connections with their followers.

In summary, social media sharing sites, particularly platforms like Instagram, have revolutionized brand marketing by providing brands with a platform to leverage visually appealing content to enhance brand awareness and engage with customers effectively. By capitalizing on the visual-centric nature of these platforms, brands can create compelling content that resonates with their audience, driving brand affinity and ultimately contributing to business success.

Social networking sites serve as primary platforms for users to directly connect with others by sharing, responding to, and interacting with content from individuals who share similar personal interests. These platforms typically facilitate users in creating a list of connections, allowing others on the list to confirm these connections. Some social networking sites, like LinkedIn, are tailored for professional networking, while others, like Facebook, blur the line between personal and professional interactions (Chahat C, Sachin G, Raj M. 2020, 1951). Facebook, for instance, has emerged as a dominant force in the realm of social networking, boasting over 2 billion users worldwide and evolving to meet diverse user demands over the years (Maryam, 2021). It enables users to connect globally, stay informed about global events, and express their viewpoints.

Media-sharing sites, on the other hand, serve as platforms for storing and disseminating visual content, including images, infographics, and illustrations, capturing the attention of others (Shayne, 2021). While social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn allow users to post photographs, they are not primarily considered media-sharing networks. Media-sharing platforms, however, are solely dedicated to the sharing of visual content and are increasingly recognized as effective channels for online marketing. By focusing on the sharing of visual content, these platforms provide unique opportunities for engagement and promotion.

Consequently, social media marketing presents opportunities for interaction while demanding innovative and unconventional strategies (Kweskin, 2007) to ensure customers experience brand immersion and product engagement (Xiaofen & Yiling, 2009). Marketers are thus urged to leverage social media to cultivate brand presence online and stimulate purchase intentions (Cuming, 2008 as cited in Astoriano et al., 2022). Mayfield (2008) characterizes social networking as a platform for creative expression with a human-centric focus, underscoring its value in providing marketers with insights into human connections and interactions.

In this context, social media has fostered customer-to-customer interactions and facilitated dialogue between customers and brands (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The significance of this surge in interpersonal engagement lies in its ability to raise awareness and adaptability in an evolving environment, thereby elevating the role of social media marketing in the broader marketing landscape (Mayfield, 2011).

Utilizing marketing as a crucial component of a company's overall business strategy plays a pivotal role in attracting new customers, enhancing satisfaction among current clients, and retaining existing clientele. Central to the marketing concept is the management and analysis of relationships between a brand, prospective consumers, and current customers. With the evolution of marketing practices over time, various strategies have emerged, with digital marketing being a prominent example. The digital realm has become an indispensable aspect of modern life, with over 4 billion individuals globally connected and spending an average of 6 hours online daily (Simon, 2021). This pervasive connectivity serves multiple purposes, including social interaction and information consumption, emphasizing the necessity for brands to be fully integrated into the digital landscape to reach their audience effectively.

Social media marketing is a subset of digital marketing. Weinberg (2009) defines social media marketing as the process of enabling individuals to promote their websites, products, or services through online social channels, tapping into a much broader community inaccessible via traditional channels. Social media, initially designed for social interaction, has evolved into one of the most powerful marketing tools available to businesses today. It has proven to be a cost-effective strategy for advertising and promotion (Risqo, 2020). Research by Gordhamer (2009) identified a correlation between social media marketing and a shift from "selling" to "building connections" with customers, emphasizing the importance of fostering relationships with potential buyers to drive repeat purchases and enhance brand loyalty. According to Jan & Khan (2014), social media serves as an innovative tool for organizations to establish robust public relations with customers on virtual networks.

As Web 2.0 and the prevalence of social media usage have grown, so has the development of social media marketing. Weinberg (2009) underscores that due to the engaging nature of social media, businesses can leverage it to promote their products and reach a broader audience than traditional promotional methods would allow. The objective of social media marketing is to disseminate valuable information to a company's clients and prospects (Muhammad, 2021). Messages that resonate with consumers are more likely to be shared within their networks, thereby likening social media marketing to a large-scale word-of-mouth campaign.

Facebook stands out as the predominant social network, functioning as a comprehensive platform for social networking activities. Its significance extends beyond individual users to encompass marketing departments, owing to its remarkable and swift evolution facilitated by its uncluttered design and minimal advertising. Facebook's appeal lies in its well-organized, user-friendly interface, which amalgamates various functionalities, incorporating aspects of LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter into a single platform. Moreover, it serves as a cost-effective avenue for media coverage, with many companies leveraging Facebook fan pages to engage with their audience.

When creating a fan page on Facebook, companies must carefully consider their target demographic and tailor the content accordingly. Exclusive content offerings are often used to enhance the appeal of fan pages and differentiate them from competitors. However, assessing the value of a fan page can be challenging, with questions arising about the significance of the fan count and how to quantify the value of each fan. While the number of fans is a crucial metric, it can sometimes be misleading, as a large fan count does not necessarily correlate with active engagement or meaningful interactions. Therefore, evaluating the growth rate of a fan page is deemed essential by authors such as (Di Pietro and Pantano, 2012) to gauge its marketing significance.

Twitter is a social networking platform akin to Facebook but distinguished by its minimalist interface. Often likened to an internet SMS service, Twitter enables users to send and receive short messages through various tools, making it highly adaptable and increasingly popular. Notable for its user base comprising influential individuals, Twitter serves as an ideal platform for website promotion, necessitating strategic and thoughtful engagement. While globally recognized and established, Twitter is gradually gaining popularity in Macedonia and the Balkan region, attracting influential figures, business professionals, and public relations managers. Primarily utilized for work promotion and customer communication, Twitter also serves as a platform for leisure and social interaction. Effective use of Twitter involves maintaining a balanced approach to posts and statuses, focusing on content that piques user interest while avoiding excessive

product promotion. Additionally, advertising on Twitter is best achieved through subtle and engaging methods, such as interactive activities and competitions.

YouTube, one of the earliest social networks alongside Facebook, empowers small businesses with minimal resources to create and share compelling videos with a wide audience. With a staggering number of videos uploaded every minute, YouTube presents valuable marketing opportunities, reaching only those viewers interested in the product or service. However, successful campaigns on YouTube necessitate short and impactful videos, complemented by integrated promotional strategies across various media channels to maximize visibility.

LinkedIn, a business-oriented social network, facilitates professional connections and networking. MySpace, Facebook's major competitor, initially surged in popularity but has since stagnated. Unlike Facebook, MySpace blurs the lines between personal and brand identities, providing businesses with expanded friend networks. However, public messages on MySpace should be used judiciously to avoid adverse effects.

The advancement of technology has ushered in the emergence of new social media platforms, attracting a growing user base. Consumer purchasing journeys have evolved into multi-channel, multi-step pathways that reflect the distinct motivations and dynamics of each purchase. Social media now plays a pivotal role across the awareness, consideration, and purchase stages of the customer journey. Consumers are drawn to social media for its myriad benefits, including easy access to vast information resources on the internet, aiding them in making informed purchasing decisions. Numerous studies have highlighted that positive feedback about products significantly influences consumers' purchasing decisions, enhancing their confidence in their buying ability.

In addition to serving as an information source, social media serves as a platform for users to stay updated on the latest trends and new products or services. Through social media, users are exposed to a plethora of brands, products, and potential purchases, enabling them to expand their knowledge and explore various options. Furthermore, social media facilitates the sharing of favorite products and brand experiences among users, fostering community engagement and influencing purchasing decisions.

Social media's convenience and time-saving features enable users to initiate and complete their purchase journeys seamlessly. It serves as a bridge between consumers and brands, functioning as a tool to enhance brand awareness and foster connections between consumers and brands. For effective communication with the audience, a company must possess a thorough understanding of its target demographic. This entails gaining insight into the audience's perceptions of the company and its products. Prior to engaging with the public, it is imperative for the company to assess its market image by analyzing audience opinions, as emphasized by Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015). This initial step involves conducting a comprehensive analysis to gauge the prevailing sentiments toward the company.

Once the company has discerned its market image, the subsequent step involves crafting a message tailored to its objectives. This message is then disseminated through suitable media channels to facilitate optimal communication with the target audience. The acceptance of the company's products by consumers signifies their endorsement and enables the company to maintain its competitive edge, as noted by Gambetti and Graffigna (2015). In essence, integrated marketing communications serves as a pathway to achieving competitive advantage, provided it is implemented effectively by the company.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN, DATA COLLECTION AND PRESENTATION

Data collection for this study utilized a quantitative methodology. Quantitative research employs numerical data and graphical representations to validate theories and assumptions derived from collected data (Babbie, 2010). The aim of employing this methodology was not to arrive at definitive conclusions, but rather to gain insights into the location and nature of the problem, as well as to ascertain perceptions. Importantly, the information gathered through this research method is presented in graphical formats (Wu, Deng, and Huang, 2011).

The research was conducted through an online survey distributed to students at the University of Skopje. The survey questionnaire, developed in Macedonian, was structured based on the theoretical framework outlined in previous sections of the study, which encompassed decision-making processes, information processing theory, and social media marketing. The questionnaire focused on probing respondents' experiences with using social media for their purchasing decisions. The questionnaire was distributed to around 500 students via their students' email. From this outreach, 116 responses were received, representing a response rate of approximately 23%. By examining responses to two key questions, it may be feasible to discern if social media has influenced decision-making processes differently across these two segments.

Regarding respondent demographics, 68.1% identified as female, while 31.9% identified as male (Figure 1).

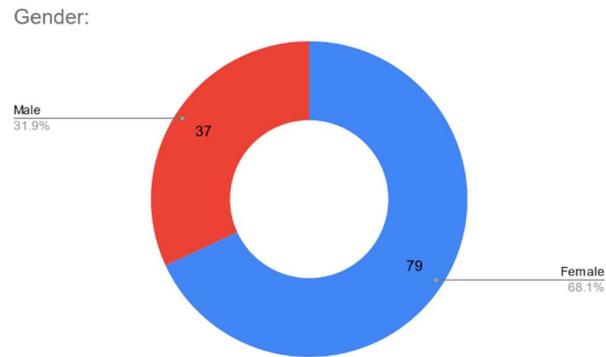


Figure 1. Gender distribution

Out of the 116 responses received, individuals aged 18-21 represented the largest percentage, accounting for 39.7% of the total. The age group of 22-25 exhibited 28%, while the categories of 26-30 years old and over 30 are as well represented with 12.9% and 23.3% (Figure 2).

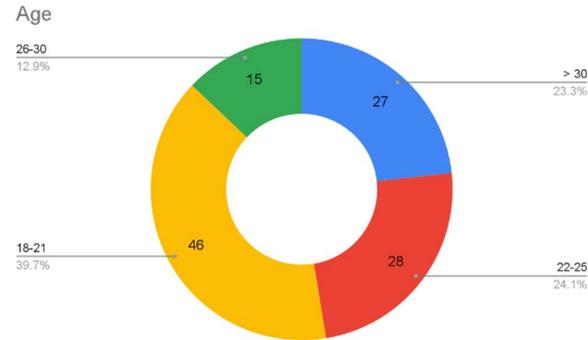


Figure 2. Age group

Figure 3 shows which types of social media platforms are predominantly utilized. Social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook emerge as the most commonly used, with a usage rate of 90.5% and 80.2%. Tiktok is next commonly used from 48.3% of the respondents and Snapchat from 33.6% of the respondents. Inkedin and Twiter are least used social media by 17.2 and 14.7% of the respondents. Still around 13% of the respondents use some other social media.

Given the widespread usage of social networking sites, marketers often integrate them into their strategies. Leveraging these platforms allows companies to effectively convey their messages, as consumers tend to be more receptive to content on popular social media channels. Consequently, marketing through these platforms can significantly enhance brand recognition.

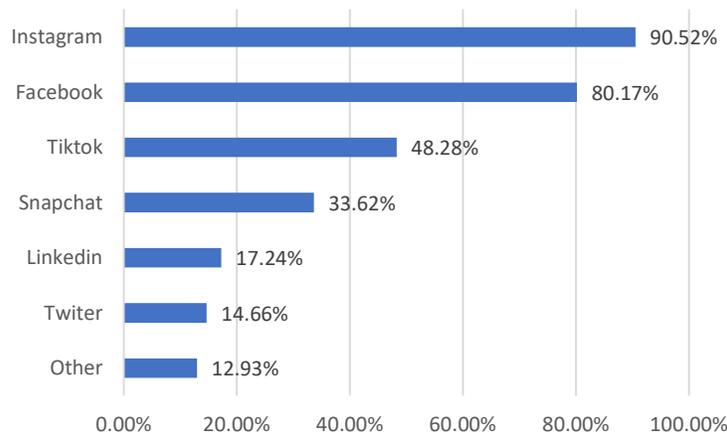


Figure 3. Types of social media used in daily lives

The participants allocate their time to social media, with the majority spending significant amounts. Specifically, 28.4% of respondents devote more than three hours daily, while 20.7% spend between two to three hours, and an equal percentage of 20.7%

allocate one to two hours. Additionally, 12.1% of respondents spend less than thirty minutes on social media.

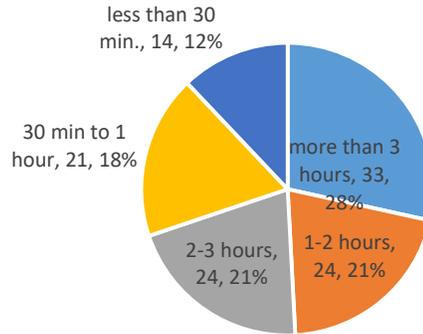


Figure 4. Time spent on social media

Regarding the responses to the question: "Have you ever made a purchase decision based on a post or advertisement on social media?", the majority of respondents (72.4%) selected "Yes". This indicates that most individuals acknowledge social media as a useful tool and are purchasing through social media.

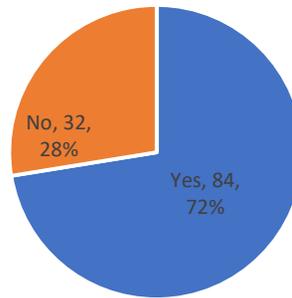


Figure 5. The influence of social media on purchasing decision

The perception of respondents regarding brands actively engaging users on social media is predominantly positive, with some expressing neutral views. No responses viewed brands' engagement with users on social media negatively.

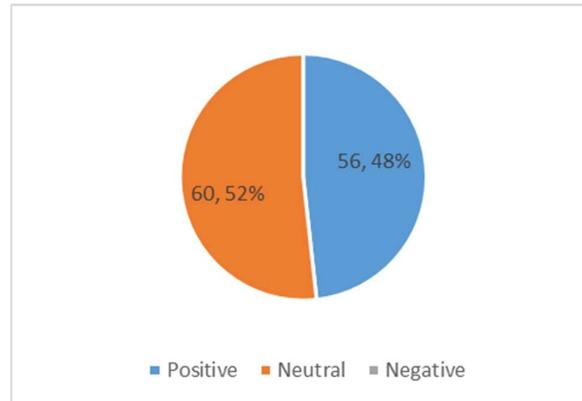


Figure 6. The perception of brands that actively engage users on social media

When questioned about the type of content from brands on social media that engages them the most, the majority of respondents (51.7%) prefer videos, followed by images at 35.3%. Text posts were favored by 8.6% of respondents, while infographics were selected by 0.9% and other types of content by 3.4%.

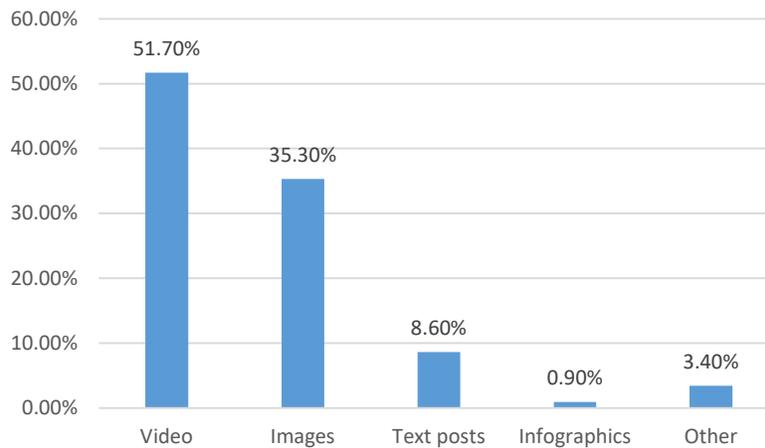


Figure 7. Which type of content from brands on social media do you feel engages you the most?

3. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The analysis of results and statistical charts reveals the significant impact of social media on purchasing decisions. Consumers readily utilize social media as a tool to access vast amounts of information quickly. Based on the 116 responses received demographic information provided, the majority of respondents identified as female, comprising 68.1%, while 31.9% identified as male. Out of the total, individuals aged 18-21 represented the largest demographic group, accounting for 39.7% of the total. The age group of 22-25 comprised 28% of respondents, while those aged 26-30 and over 30 were

also represented with 12.9% and 23.3% respectively. In terms of social media platform usage, Instagram and Facebook emerged as the most popular choices, with usage rates of 90.5% and 80.2% respectively. TikTok followed with 48.3% usage among respondents, while Snapchat was utilized by 33.6%. LinkedIn and Twitter were the least used platforms, with 17.2% and 14.7% respectively, while approximately 13% of respondents reported using other social media platforms. Given the widespread usage of social networking sites, marketers often integrate them into their strategies to effectively convey messages, as consumers tend to be more receptive to content on popular social media channels. Consequently, marketing through these platforms can significantly enhance brand recognition. Respondents allocate a significant amount of time to social media, with 28.4% spending more than three hours daily, while 20.7% spend between two to three hours, and an equal percentage of 20.7% allocate one to two hours. Additionally, 12.1% spend less than thirty minutes on social media. Regarding purchasing decisions influenced by social media, the majority of respondents (72.4%) indicated that they have made a purchase decision based on a post or advertisement on social media. This suggests that most individuals perceive social media as a useful tool for making purchases. The perception of respondents regarding brands actively engaging users on social media is predominantly positive, with some expressing neutral views. Notably, no respondents viewed brands' engagement with users on social media negatively. When asked about the type of content from brands on social media that engages them the most, the majority of respondents (51.7%) indicated a preference for videos, followed by images at 35.3%. Text posts were favored by 8.6% of respondents, while infographics were selected by 0.9%, and other types of content by 3.4%.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the data and analysis presented, it is evident that social media plays a significant role in consumer behavior and decision-making processes. The widespread usage of social networking sites, particularly Instagram and Facebook, underscores their importance as platforms for marketers to engage with consumers effectively. Consumers allocate substantial time to social media, with many spending multiple hours daily, indicating the platform's integral role in their daily lives. Furthermore, a majority of respondents reported making purchase decisions based on posts or advertisements encountered on social media, highlighting its influence on consumer purchasing behavior.

The perception of brands actively engaging users on social media is overwhelmingly positive among respondents, indicating that such engagement is viewed favorably. This suggests that brands can leverage social media effectively to enhance brand recognition and engage with their target audience.

In terms of content preferences, videos emerged as the most engaging content type for respondents, followed by images. This underscores the importance of visual content in capturing consumer attention and driving engagement on social media platforms.

Overall, the findings emphasize the significance of social media as a marketing tool and its impact on consumer behavior. Marketers should continue to leverage social media platforms to connect with consumers, deliver targeted messages, and drive purchasing decisions effectively.

One notable weakness is the comparatively small size of the data sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Also, the limitation regarding the sample is

associated with students, as responses from other demographic segments may vary. To improve the accuracy and representativeness of the results, future research should aim to expand the sample size to include a more diverse cross-section of society and geography. Additionally, data was collected from individuals who were willing to participate in the study, which may introduce bias into the findings. Furthermore, the overall number of data points collected may not be sufficient, potentially leading to errors in interpretation and an incomplete portrayal of the population under study.

Due to the constraints of time and scope in this study, numerous hypotheses related to the issue were explored, albeit from a relatively broad perspective to offer readers an overarching understanding. Consequently, if further research is feasible, a more comprehensive survey should be conducted to address the study's objectives. Given the expansive nature of this topic, additional research should involve gathering more extensive data through surveys to yield more specific results. Furthermore, research on this topic should encompass participants from various regions to diversify the collected data, thereby examining how social media influences consumer decisions among individuals with different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, future qualitative research could be undertaken to deepen our understanding of the impact of social media. Additionally, further research exploring the nuances of consumer behavior on social media, particularly across different demographics and cultural contexts, could provide valuable insights for marketers in optimizing their social media strategies.

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