

The Impact of Social Media Interactions on Consumer Decision Making in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This research focuses on the impact of social media on consumer decision making, on how different social media aspects can affect consumers' way of thinking and decision making. The evolution of social media plays an important role in the overall decision-making process of the consumer as it has revolutionized the way people think, feel about, and consume things. Social media interaction is the most important method of shaping the decision of people and knowing what they feel and want from the business. The social media channels involve the content creations by the audience apart from that generated by the publishing houses or the media companies and even the social media channel such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. This research explored how social media interactions play a significant role in consumer decision-making with a scope of Saudi Arabia user. With a total population of 35.08mil (GMI,2022), 27.08 million, or 79.25% are active social media users, either for personal or commercial usage through its' posting on their favorite types of content. Businesses can use this research paper to learn how the population of Saudi Arabia interacts on social media and how businesses can create strategies that appealing to customers' habits. A quantitative approach research questionnaires is developed to explore the relationship between social media interaction and consumer decision-making by using different dimensions of social media interactions. The purpose of this preliminary study is to determine the reliability and validity of the instrument used and feasible for full-scale analysis of the studied phenomenon. PLS-SEM is employed in this preliminary study with seventy-five respondents from a few regions has been selected to response on the questionnaires through simple random sampling method. The result of PLS-SEM analysis on the measurement model had showed a robust analysis of internal reliability and validity. Assessment of items and constructs included in the study exhibits a good internal consistency and valid, thus, reflects an acceptable research model that are feasible and ready a full-scale analysis.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Media Interactions, Consumer Decision Making, PLS-SEM, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Social media is the online communication medium on which we can interact with each other, share content, and get the information from. (Sony Varghese, 2021). There has been tremendous growth in the use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook over the past decade (Chen and Qasim, 2021). The quickly increased popularity of social networks and social commerce are considered the third revolution of communication that provides freedom for companies to communicate with the target audience, regardless of place and time (Zhang et al., 2020). Due to the improvement of technologies and increasing number of internet users, more companies choose social networks to promote sales of goods and services, increase recognition and visibility and communication with potential clients in real-time (Dalia Štreimikienė,2021). The users of social media interact with brands, companies,

and other users before taking a decision to purchase a product or service. The online social networks provided facilities for consumers to interact with one another, accessing to information, comments, reviews, and rates that can help them for purchasing decisions in different ways (Eihab Fathelrahman and Aydin Basarir 2018). Yu et al. (2019) stated that some of the brands were advertised in social networks (such as Facebook, YouTube, and others) as well as the use of services from bloggers and influencers who also create and manage their content.

Marketers are highly keen on analyzing consumer behavior now than the past, due to evolving nature of intense competition. Importantly, understanding consumer decision-making process stages for any product, service or event is among the fundamentals of analyzing consumer behavior. (Hettiarachchi H.A.H, 2018).

Looking at the report by GASTAT (General Authority of Statistics, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) in 2019, 98.43% of youth use social networking sites, hence, generate a need for an in-depth study how social media interactions can impact consumer decision making. This study will focus on different dimensions of social media interactions including online community, discussion forums, social media networking sites, and will be beneficial for businesses and marketers to plan their strategies for business growth.

Literature Review

Consumer Decision Making.

A consumer's behavior and thinking are comprised of certain ideas, emotions and psychological associations that expedite the decision-making process (Jyrki Suomala,2020). Social media plays an integral role in evoking psychological and social needs by catering individualized needs through social media websites (Baum, Spann, Füller and Thürndl, 2019). This dilemma begins when a consumer recognize that he needs certain product and service that is being displayed on social media, such as, Facebook, Instagram, twitter etc., that allows the information search either by looking at the reviews or seeking advice by other social media consumers. This process further reaches to the purchase decision and consumption that is shown by Riley (2012) by drawing his 5-stage decision making model (Ho and Law, 2020).

Problem Recognition → Information Search → Evaluation → Purchase Decision → Post Purchase Behavior

Figure 1: The 5-Stage Decision Making Model (Riley,2012)

The power of social media is getting more powerful day by day because its elements are interconnected with each other and capture its consumers' attention step by step through different modes in different ways. Interconnection of different forums and websites allow marketers to promote a smooth flow of information by targeting a large number of social media consumers (Simon and Tossan, 2018). Social media facilitates a two-way conversation platform that is different from traditional media as it helps consumers to participate and providing feedback on various outlets.

Social Media.

Social media is an important field of study and practice in both interdisciplinary and communication fields. The social network has become a tool for bringing people together, allowing individuals to list the users they are connected to, and to see other users' connections. (Yasemin Özkent, 2022).

Social Media Interactions

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter provide completely new ways for brands and consumers to interact, and thus have become important platforms for brands seeking to create customer value (Mitchell Hamilton, Velitchka D. Kaltcheva, Andrew J. Rohm, 2022)

Social Exchange Theory:

The theory was arguably best summarized by Homans (1958, p. 606) when he wrote:

“Social behavior is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as the symbols of approval or prestige. Persons that give much to others try to get much from them, and persons that get much from others are under pressure to give much to them. This process of influence tends to work out at equilibrium to a balance in the exchanges. For a person in an exchange, what he gives may be a cost to him, just as what he gets may be a reward, and his behavior changes less as the difference of the two, profit, tends to a maximum.”

This theory is very much connected with the study of impact of social media interactions on consumer decision making as social media is extensively used in organizations around the world (Zhiwei Wang et. al, 2022). Social media is used with the perception that it will increase the efficiency of interaction and facilitate knowledge exchange (Wei et al., 2020), and increase customer satisfaction (Casper Ferm and Thaichon, 2021). As, social exchange theory is used to explain the behavior of customers (Casper Ferm and Thaichon, 2021), employee job performance (Kuruzovich et al., 2021), Considering associated benefits, most companies from the group of Fortune 500 have adopted social media (Ali et al., 2020).

Dimensions of Social Media interactions:

Since social networks consist of communities of people with shared interests and preferences, social factors most likely play a significant role in customers' SM brand engagement. (Hardeep Chahal, Jochen Wirtz, and Anu Verma, 2019). So, there is a lot of need to study different perspectives of social media interactions on consumer decision making.

Social media provides opportunities for consumers for interaction with others, getting and analyzing information, evaluating reviews, commences and experiences that are useful for them to make a buying decision in diverse ways (Saravanakumar, 2020). According to (Neeru Saini, Garima Sangwan Madhur Verma, Adarsh Kohli, Manmeet Kaur, and P. V. M. Lakshmi, 2020) Facebook was found to be the most popular SNS (97%) that respondents were using. When respondents were asked about their way of communicating with friends other than through social networking sites, 80% of the respondents preferred to communicate using WhatsApp. More than half of the respondents had online contacts whom they had never met in the real world. About half of the respondents (55%) had met someone in real after contacting them online, and one-third of them were accompanied by their friends or parents during such meetings. Only income and regular time spent on social networking sites had positive substantial moderating effects on the significant connection between social networking sites and buying decision processes, according to the moderation effect of comparative characteristics (Abdallah et al., 2021). Consumers favor social networking sites in the decision-making phase, primarily because of its large network, huge knowledge, exposure, peer reliability, etc. (Wickrama Hewage 2019).

Consequently, the study of social media and its impacts on customers and businesses is progressively attracting academic attention and is a new research area for strategists and marketers. (Gil Appel & Lauren Grewal & Rhonda Hadi & Andrew T. Stephen, 2019). The present perspective on social media is that people use it for creating, accessing, and spreading information via WOM (Word of mouth) to various types of others, be it known “strong ties” or “weak ties” in their networks or unknown “strangers”. Some extant research has looked at social media from the WOM perspective of the consequences of the transmission of WOM (e.g., creating a Facebook

post or tweeting) on others (e.g., Herhausen et al. 2019). Hence, reviewed of related literatures had justified the main research question for full study that is “How social media interactions impact on consumer decision?”

Methodology

This research followed a quantitative research approach. It is a way to learn about a particular group of people, known as a sample population. Using scientific inquiry, quantitative research relies on data that are observed or measured to examine questions about the sample population. (Sharique Ahmad, Saeeda Wasim, Sumaiya Irfan, Sudarshana Gogoi, Anshika Srivastava, Zarina Farheen, 2019).

The research design of the study is based upon survey method that was conducted through questionnaire distribution to social media users in Saudi Arabia. The sample size of this preliminary study is 75 individuals who are regular users of social media network. The sample consists of male and female participants above age of 15. The sampling will be done randomly in Saudi Arabia. This study will focus on how usage of social media shapes the overall thinking of people to take decision for purchasing a product or service online.

This preliminary research study ultimate objective was to determine the reliability and validity of the inner model, constructs, and measurement items to be used in the subsequent full research by utilizing PLS-SEM analysis technique toward the current setting of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the conceptualization of relationship between variables that was deduced from social interaction theories relative the phenomenon. Hence, the main research objective for full research study was to determine impacts of social media interactions on consumer decision making.

Measurement for Consumer Decision Making (CDM).

The measure for consumer decision making in the present study is adopted from Song and Yoo (2016) and Nyagucha (2017). These dimensions consisted of self-rating items on five-point Likert scale format level of agreeing and disagreeing, ranging from '1' "Strongly Disagree" to '5' "Strongly Agree" as per table 1.0 below. Respondents are asked to indicate how consumer decision making influence them to decide on their action on social media considering the results could show a relatively perfect predictive validity. This variable is being measured through 10 items that are directed towards the factors that help decision making related to a purchase amongst social media users.

Table 1.0. Measurement items for Consumer Decision Making (CDM).

Items
Social media platforms affect my willingness to visit brands outlets.
Social media platforms affect my intention to go ahead and make a purchase.
A social media page affects my overall decision to purchase.
Social media stimulates me to recognize a need for something before buying it.
Social media triggers me to purchase a product through its advertisements.
I always achieve a desire for something new through social media.
Social media provides solutions on what to buy, where to buy and why to buy.
Social media plays an important role in promoting a brand.
Social media affect my vision of the brand.
Social media allows me to save time and shape my buying behavior.

Measurement for Social media interaction (SMI).

Items of measurement for social media interaction are adapted from the study of Mahmood (2019) These dimensions consisted of self-rating items on five-point Likert scale format level of agreeing and disagreeing, ranging from '1' "Strongly Disagree" to '5' "Strongly Agree" as per below table. Respondents are asked to indicate how social media interaction influence them to make decision considering the results could show a relative significant interaction with other have an impact to what the user decide. This variable is comprised of 10 items that are intending to measure interactions through online communities, discussion forums and social networking sites and their impact on consumer behavior.

Table 1.1 Measurement Items for Social Media Interaction (SMI).

Items
It makes me feel connected to others by using social media.
It lets me stay in touch with distant people by using social media.
Online communities on social media enable customers to receive real time community support.
Social media allows people to link with each other through online communities.
Online communities allow consumers to engage in brand-related conversations.
Social media networks allow users to respond on content posted by other customers.
Social media networks allow consumers to share their experiences and knowledge on the website.
Reading discussions about a product or service influences my purchase decisions.
Reading positive discussions about a product or service persuades me to make a purchase.
I trust everything I read within online discussion forums.

Based on literatures and past empirical studies, the following is the proposed hypothesis:

H1: Social media interaction will have a direct impact on the consumer decision making.

Data collection and analysis.

Self-administered 5-points Likert scale survey questionnaires were distributed by using probability simple random sampling technique to social media users. This study employed variance-based structural equation modelling analysis technique in assessing the outer model (Hair, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2017). Utilizing the SmartPLS 3.0 software package in carrying-out the analysis to measure the internal reliability by examining the indicator and composite reliability and on the validity assessment of convergent and discriminant validity.

Results and discussion

Referring to the PLS-SEM analysis technique, the most popular approach was the two-stage approach that analyses the structural model and the measurement model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The first stage is concern with the outer model (measurement model) and for the second stage focuses on the structural (inner model). The former relates the latent variables (LVs) with other latent variables, while the latter relates manifest variables (MVs) to latent variables (LVs). However, in this preliminary analysis the focus was given to the outer model or also known as measurement model in determining the reliability and validity of the scales used in the research model (Ghozali & Latan, 2015; Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017)

Outer Model: Instrument Reliability.

As for the measurement model, analysis the constructs' reliability is to be examined by assessing indicator reliability and composite reliability. The outer loading value is to be assessed as for indicator reliability by looking at loading range between 0-1 and the cut-off point is 0.7 and above to be considered as reliable (Hair et al., 2017; Latan & Ramli, 2013). On the other hand, composite reliability was determined by the coefficient alpha value or internal consistency reliability number. The cut-off value for composite reliability is 0.7 that indicates the scale are having an acceptable internal consistency (Hair et al., 2017). Additionally, if the research is exploratory in nature the acceptable cut-off values of measurement model is compromised and considered to be reliable when the values of indicator reliability is 0.4 or higher and 0.6 or higher for composite reliability (Ghozali & Latan, 2015; Hulland, 1999).

Table 1.3 below exhibit the result of indicator reliability by referring to the outer loading values. The result showed that all values of outer loadings of all constructs are higher than 0.70 except for few items labelled CDM6 to CDM10 that intended to measure the consumer decision making (CDM) ranges between 0.538 to 0.651. As for this stage of preliminary study and considering small sample size and recommendation by Garson (2016) & Ghozali & Latan (2015), it is not recommended to remove items that are having low loading values of less than 0.5. Hence, this study deemed appropriate to retain the items CDM6 – CDM10 and found constructs included in the model are reliable.

Table 1.2 Indicator Reliability

	CDM	SMI
CDM1	0.851	
CDM2	0.821	
CDM3	0.772	
CDM4	0.851	
CDM5	0.771	
CDM6	0.538	
CDM7	0.581	
CDM8	0.574	
CDM9	0.609	
CDM10	0.651	
SMI1		0.782
SMI2		0.712
SMI3		0.805
SMI4		0.811
SMI5		0.814
SMI6		0.766
SMI7		0.881
SMI8		0.788
SMI9		0.760
SMI10		0.752

In addition, table 1.4 below depicts the result of internal consistency analysis of the construct. The result indicates the value of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability are considerably high that explicate the constructs employed are having a good consistency and reliable. The values for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability are as stated in the table below.

Table 1.4 Internal Consistency

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
CDM (Consumer Decision Making)	0.903	0.919
SMI (Social Media Interaction)	0.874	0.909

Outer Model: Instrument Validity.

It is important to consider the instrument validity as result conceived on internal reliability does not confirm its validity. Indeed, a valid instrument reflects its reliability (Proctor, 2005). Hence, it is imperative to examine the other elements of convergent validity by considering the value of AVE (average variance extracted) that refers to the level in which measuring a particular concept converges with a set of variables (Hair et al., 2010). The AVE sheds an explanation of the average variance extracted among a set of items in conjunction to the shared variance with the measurement errors. The cut-off value of AVE is 0.50 for a set of items to converge in construct measurement (Hair et al., 2017).

In addition to the AVE, SmartPLS allow an additional examination on validity by having generating discriminant validity of Fornell Larcker's table. Discriminant validity elucidates the level differentiation among the constructs items as to confirm no overlapping of items describing the constructs. Conversely, discriminant validity ensures that unrelated items truly have no relation in determining unidimensional (Compeau, Higgins, & Huff, 1999). For the confirmation of discriminant validity, Fornell and Larcker's (1981) table is referred, where the outer model's validity is confirmed if the diagonal elements are greater compared to the element of the same column and the role within which the item lies in. Moreover, discriminant validity also can be assessed by looking at the cross-loading values of all items. Through this assessment of discriminant validity, all items should have a strong load to their intended construct and having acceptable loading, in which, it conforms having discriminant validity (Gefen & Straub, 2005).

Table 1.5 below depict the AVE values matching for each construct. The values for each construct namely CDM and SMI are above 0.5. This result had further validated the convergence validity of the construct as the values of AVE are all above the cut-off point of 0.5 suggested by Gefen & Straub (2005) and Hair et al., (2012).

Table 1.5 Average Variance Extracted

Construct	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CDM (Consumer Decision Making)	0.512
SMI (Social Media Interaction)	0.666

Regarding the discriminant validity, this study employed Fornell Larcker's criterion. Table below exhibit Fornell Larcker criterion assessment. This validity assessment measures shared variance within the construct that should be higher compared to the variance shared among the other constructs (Compeau et al., 1999). The square root of AVE values for each construct is positioned diagonal and it should be higher that its correlation with any other construct below it since a construct shared less variance with other than its own (Hair, Sarstedt, Pieper, & Ringle, 2012). Hence the result confirmed on discriminant validity and explicate unidimensionality for each scale included in the research.

Table 1.6. Fornell Larker Criterion.

	CDM	SMI
CDM	0.701	
SMI	0.542	0.816

Conclusion

The aim of this preliminary study is to analyze on internal consistency and validity of scales (measurement) to be used in a full-scale study is feasible in the current setting of Saudi Arabia. The above result had showed the multiple examinations of reliability and validity that explicate the robustness of PLS-SEM as 2nd generation analysis techniques (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011) that able to overcome the criticism of missed conceptualize of Cronbach's Alpha in determining internal consistency of measurement and validity of scales (Cho & Kim, 2015; Raykov, 2008). Review of literature had contends on mostly adopted Cronbach's Alpha as internal consistency analysis and some mistakenly assume it demonstrate unidimensionality in determining the reliability of instruments (Panayides, 2013; Schmitt, 1995). As been presented by tables above of the result of study it had indicated that the levels of reliability and validity of the instrument are acceptable, and it confirmed on unidimensional of the scales. Thus, this preliminary analysis had confirmed the constructs and its measurement items were valid and reliable as for data to be employed for a full-scale analysis with actual data.

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