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Investigating the Role of Online Marketing on ZCAS University Students' Buying Behaviour

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of study was to explore the impact of online marketing on the buying behaviour of ZCAS University students. The study was cross-sectional, collecting data from a sample of 60 ZCAS University students at a single point in time. Data was collected through a survey questionnaire, pilot tested, and refined. The data was analyzed using Google Forms and spreadsheets, with Chi square tests and mean and standard deviation used to examine relationships among variables and extract relevant conclusions. The study concludes that there is a high level of online marketing reach among ZCAS University students and most of them spend most of their time online on social media. Further, consumers perceive social media as the most influential online channel in convincing them to make a purchase decision. The study also finds that there are high exposure levels to online marketing and the consumer attitudes towards it are positive. Notably, there exists no significant relationship between buying behaviour and (1) time spent on the channels, (2) attitude towards online media and (3) the level of exposure to the online marketing channels. The study recommends marketers should tailor marketing to specific audiences, effectively utilizing social media platforms, exploring cross-platform integration, implementing data-driven targeting, and continuously monitoring and adapting strategies. With 95% of respondents recognizing the widespread awareness of online marketing, marketers should focus on maximizing the reach of their campaigns across various platforms. They should also consider the influence of social media on purchase decisions, leveraging influencer partnerships, and utilizing targeted marketing tools. Additionally, marketers should leverage analytics tools to track user engagement and segment audiences.*

Keywords -Buying behaviour, Consumer behaviour, Consumer attitudes, Online marketing, Purchase decision

I.   INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to explore the impact of online marketing on the buying behaviour of ZCAS University students. The research used questionnaire surveys to uncover the underlying mechanisms driving ZCAS University students' purchasing decisions in response to online marketing stimuli. Therefore, the research question designed to guide the study was: How does the integration of online marketing channels impact the purchasing behaviour of ZCAS University students across various product categories? To answer this question three propositions as outlined below were designed to guide the study:

P1:Consumer purchase decisionsare influenced by online marketing reach and consumer attitudes towards online marketing.
P2: Consumers respond effectively to online marketing channels where they spend the most time.
P3: Consumers who spend more time on online marketing channels are more likely to make a purchase than those who do not.

Based on our findings, we conclude that there is a high level of online marketing reach among ZCAS University students and most of them spend most of their time online on social media. Further, consumers perceive social media as the most influential online channel in convincing them to make a purchase decision. We also find that there are high exposure levels to online marketing and the consumer attitudes towards it are

positive. Notably, there exists no significant relationship between buying behaviour and (1) time spent on the channels, (2) attitude towards online media and (3) the level of exposure to the online marketing channels.

The study's findings provide actionable recommendations for marketers to effectively engage with this demographic and optimize their marketing strategies. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on consumer behavior and online marketing by shedding light on the unique context of ZCAS University students, offering valuable insights for both academia and industry practitioners.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Chaffey and Smith (2017) define online marketing, also known as Internet marketing or digital marketing, as all marketing efforts that use the internet to reach and engage with potential customers. On the other hand, Kotler *et al.* (2016) consider online marketing as a "holistic concept that refers to managing all customer interactions with the company in the online environment to create positive experiences, regardless of whether they result in a sale or not."The definitions of online marketing provided hereoffer different viewpoints on utilizing digital platforms. Chaffey and Smith (2017) characterise it as employing the internet to connect with potential customers, highlighting a wide range of strategies. Conversely, Kotler *et al.*'s (2016) inclusive approach encompasses all online interactions, emphasizing positive customer experiences.The sections below delve deeper into the theoretical framework and empirical evidence that underpinonline marketing.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

In exploring the intricate connection between online marketing and consumer behaviour, various theoretical frameworks have emerged to elucidate this relationship. Among these, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) stands out as a significant framework. Developed by Davis (1989), TAM posits that consumers' acceptance and utilization of technology-driven platforms are contingent upon their perceptions of the platform's usefulness and ease of use. Essentially, if consumers perceive a technology as valuable and user-friendly, they are more likely to adopt it into their consumption behaviour.

Another influential framework in understanding consumer responses to online marketing is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). This model, proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), delves into the cognitive processes underlying consumer attitudes and behaviours when exposed to persuasive messages. According to ELM, individuals engage in varying degrees of cognitive processing, depending on factors such as motivation and ability. In the context of online marketing, this model suggests that consumers' responses to persuasive messages, such as marketing or promotional content, are influenced by the extent to which they critically evaluate and elaborate on the information presented.

Thus, both TAM and ELM offer valuable insights into the mechanisms through which online marketing stimuli interact with consumer cognition and behaviour. By considering factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, and cognitive processing, marketers can better understand and predict consumer responses to their online marketing efforts.

2.2 Empirical Studies

Online marketing encompasses various channels aimed at engaging audiences and achieving marketing objectives. These channels include Content Marketing, Email Marketing, Pay Per Click Marketing (PPC), Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and Social Media Marketing (SMM) (Ryan and Jones, 2009).

Content Marketing involves creating and distributing relevant and valuable online content to attract, acquire, and engage specific audiences (Maczuga *et al.*, 2014). It employs tools such as blogs, case studies, videos, and webinars to increase brand awareness, generate leads, and foster customer engagement. Empirical studies examining the impact of content marketing on consumer behaviour have emphasized its role in driving brand engagement and loyalty. Harrigan *et al.* (2015) reported that content marketing efforts, such as storytelling and interactive content formats, enhance consumer engagement and brand recall. Additionally, Van den Bulte and Joshi (2007) found that personalized content tailored to consumer preferences leads to higher levels of brand engagement and conversion.

Email Marketing utilizes electronic mail to directly communicate commercial messages or fundraising efforts to recipients (Fariborzi and Zahedifard, 2012). Despite advantages like customizability and measurability, it faces challenges such as undelivered emails and lack of recipient engagement. Research on email marketing effectiveness suggests that personalized and targeted email campaigns can significantly influence consumer purchase decisions. Strauss and Frost (2016) reported that personalized email messages tailored to individual preferences result in higher open and click-through rates. However, Srivastava and Johnson (2010) highlighted the importance of ethical email marketing practices to mitigate concerns regarding spam and privacy issues.

Pay Per Click Marketing (PPC) allows marketers to pay for ads only when users click on them (Hamza and Alaa, 2015). It ensures immediate listing on search engines but can be costly for businesses. Research on PPC marketing has yielded mixed findings regarding its effectiveness in influencing consumer behaviour. Tan and Teo (2014) found that PPC marketing can significantly increase brand awareness and website traffic. However, Yang *et al.* (2016) highlighted the importance of targeting accuracy in PPC campaigns, suggesting that precise targeting leads to higher conversion rates and return on investment (ROI).

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) aims to improve website visibility on search engines to attract web traffic. By optimizing content and understanding search engine algorithms, websites can achieve higher rankings in organic search results. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the significant impact of search engine optimization (SEO) on consumer behaviour. For instance, Chang *et al.* (2015) found that higher search engine rankings positively influence consumer perceptions of brand credibility and trustworthiness. Similarly, Lee and Koo (2015) reported that consumers are more likely to click on organic search results than paid marketing, indicating the importance of SEO in driving organic traffic and consumer engagement.

Social Media Marketing (SMM) utilizes online platforms like Facebook and Instagram to promote businesses and products (Nadaraja and Yazdanifard, 2013). Despite its advantages in low cost and targeted marketing, challenges such as copyright issues and privacy concerns persist. Empirical studies on SMM have underscored its role in shaping consumer behaviour through social proof and peer recommendations. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) reported that businesses can leverage social media to build authentic relationships with consumers, leading to increased brand loyalty and advocacy. Similarly, Mukosa *et al.* (2023) concluded that social media marketing significantly influences the branding of higher education institutions and is reshaping the marketing landscape by necessitating retraining for digital marketing among marketers.

In Zambia, Mukosa and Kayombo (2022) concluded that WhatsApp and Facebook were the predominant social media platforms used in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). For marketing HEIs, the most effective combination of platforms is Facebook and Twitter, followed by Twitter and WhatsApp. Additionally, the study revealed a correlation between the chosen social media platform and the age group of users.

Research on the impact of online marketing on consumer behaviour in Africa is steadily emerging, providing valuable insights into the unique dynamics of digital marketing on the continent. While empirical studies specific to Africa may be limited compared to other regions, several studies have contributed to our understanding of this phenomenon.For instance, a study by Amankwah-Amoah *et al.* (2020) explored the effectiveness of social media marketing in influencing consumer behaviour among Ghanaian youth. The findings revealed that social media platforms play a significant role in shaping purchase decisions and brand perceptions among this demographic.

Similarly, research by Mukosha and Siwale (2019) investigated the impact of online marketing on consumer behaviour in Zambia, highlighting the importance of targeted marketing and personalized content in driving consumer engagement and conversion.

III.   METHODOLOGY

This section provides the empirical framework for conducting the study. The research study was cross-sectional in nature, in which data were collected from a sample of ZCAS University students at a single point in time. It followed a quantitative research design and strategy, aiming to quantify data and provide generalized results from the selected sample.

The total ZCAS university student population was 2,255 at the time of inquiry, with 1,518 enrolled in full time, 445 in part time, and 292 in distance education. The selected sample of 60 students was divided according to the three modes of study: full time, part time, and distance education. The sample size was 2.7% of the entire student population, and the corresponding quotas for each inference were 40, 12, and 8 for full time, part time, and distance education, respectively. As Saunders *et al.* (2016: 295-298) elucidate, in scenarios where a sampling frame is absent, as in the present research, we used convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique to select the sample. Jenyo and Soyoye (2015) used non-probability sampling, stating that their selected sample size of 60 (sixty) was representative of the entire research subjects' population. Dieterich (2014) in similar research also used non-probability sampling.

Data were collected by use of a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was pilot tested to remove any ambiguity or misinterpretations that would affect reliability, and refinements were made to address any concerns.

The data collected were analyzed statistically using Google Forms and spreadsheets, with demographic and other data presented in graphical form. Chi square tests were used to understand the relationships among independent and dependent variables, while mean and standard deviation were used to examine the relationships between parameters/variables and extract relevant conclusions.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Data

Out of 60 students approached through various means such as in-person contact, phone calls, emails, and WhatsApp messages, 40 responded, representing a response rate of 66.7%. Respondents included both male and female students aged 16 and above, residing on campus, in close proximity to campus, or at a distance. Information collected included respondents' level of study (undergraduate, postgraduate, certification, or other), mode of study (full-time, part-time, or distance education), age ranges, gender, and place of residence. The study sample was representative of all student groups based on their level of study, with undergraduates comprising the largest proportion (75%), followed by postgraduates (20%), and others (5%).

As shown in Figure 1 below, most participants were full-time students (77.5%), followed by part-time students (17.5%) and distance education students (5%). The distribution of students by mode of study in the sample closely matched the quotas derived from the total population.

Figure 1 Distribution of respondents by mode of study
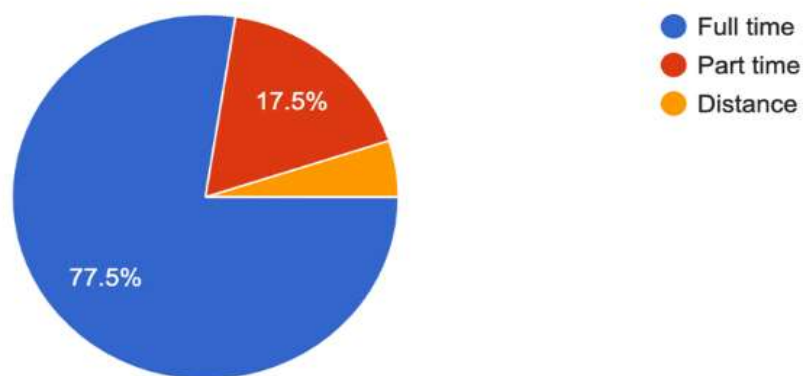
Regarding age distribution, the majority of respondents were aged between 19 and 25 (65%), followed by those aged 26 to 35 (25%), with smaller proportions in other age groups as shown in Figure 2 below. The distribution of respondents by gender showed a higher number of male students (65%) compared to female students (35%).

Figure 2 Distribution of respondents by age
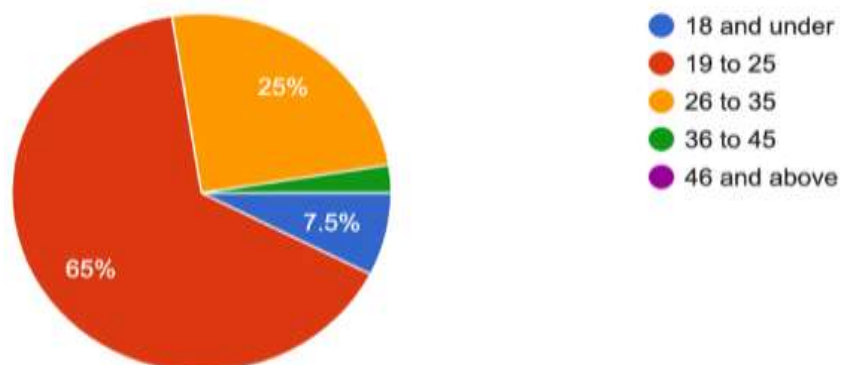
4.2 P1: Consumer purchase decisions are influenced by online marketing reach and consumer attitudes towards online marketing

The first proposition of the study examined the factors influencing consumers' purchase decisions, particularly focusing on online marketing reach and consumer attitudes towards online marketing. A significant majority (95%) of respondents reported encountering online marketing messages, indicating widespread awareness regardless of content. This finding aligns with Osewe's (2013) similar study, which recorded a 98% encounter rate. It suggests that online marketing effectively reaches its intended audience, as emphasized by Ahto (2015), who underscores the importance of marketing reach in ensuring brand awareness.

The analysis of consumer attitudes towards online marketing reveals that 80% of respondents' attitudes depend on the specific marketing, while 62.5% exhibit a positive attitude towards online marketing, finding them informative, entertaining, or awareness-creating. This positive attitude towards online marketing is consistent with findings by many scholars and, indicating that most consumers view online marketing favourably (Mukosa *et al.*, 2023; Sood, 2019;Singh, 2015). La Ferle and Lee (2003) note that consumers' attitudes towards marketing influence their perceptions of individual marketing and overall brand attitudes.

Regarding purchase behaviour influenced by online marketing, 12.5% of respondents reported frequently making purchases due to online marketing, while 37.5% occasionally did so, and 22.5% had never made a purchase because of online marketing as shown in Figure 3 below.

However, the chi-square test for independence indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between consumer attitudes towards online marketing and their buying behaviour. This contrasts with findings by Iranmanesh and Najafabadi (2013) who found a positive correlation between internet user attitudes and buying behaviour.

Figure 3 Distribution of consumers by conviction to purchase
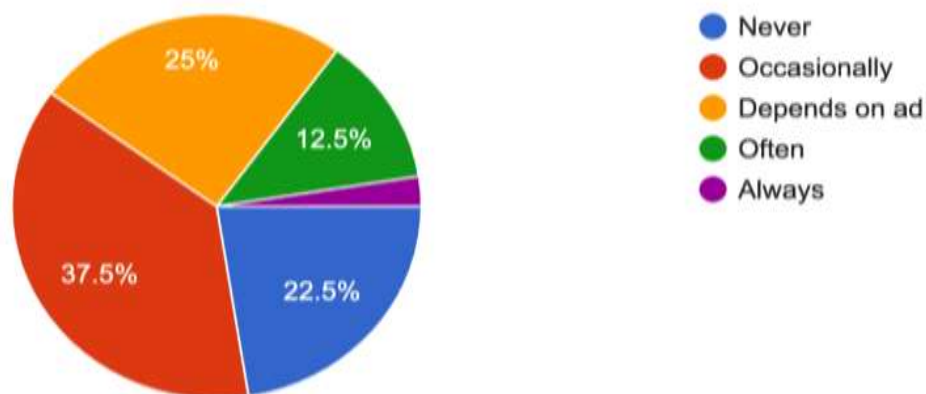

The discrepancy in findings suggests that factors beyond consumer attitudes may influence purchase decisions more significantly. Further investigation is warranted to identify these factors and understand their impact on buying behaviour.

4.3 P2: Consumers respond effectively to online marketing channels where they spend the most time

The second proposition of the study investigated whether users respond more favourably to marketing on channels where they spend more time compared to those where they spend less time. The research aims to determine respondents' time allocation across different online platforms and how it correlates with their response to marketing presented on these platforms. As shown in Figure 4 below, findings reveal that social media emerges as the most frequently used platform, with respondents spending over 3 hours a day on it on average, followed by search engines, emails, websites, and e-commerce sites, in descending order.

Figure 4 Time respondents spent on each channel a day
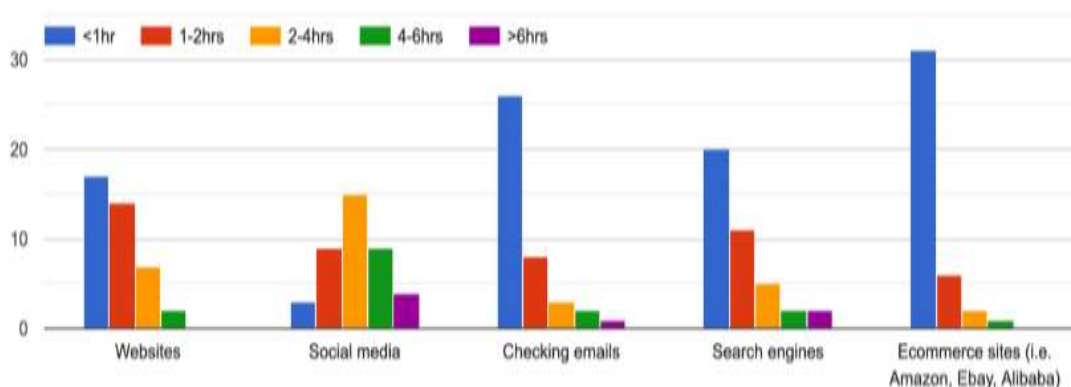
The study also assessed the influence of various marketing channels on respondents' awareness of products or services. As shown in Figure 5 below, social media, the platform on which students spend the most time, ranked highest in influencing purchase decisions, with 47.5% of respondents citing it as the most influential channel, followed by email marketing at 17.5%. These findings are consistent with the observations of Mukosa *et al.* (2023) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who noted the significant impact of social media on customer satisfaction and purchase decisions.

**Figure 5 Ranking of marketing channels**
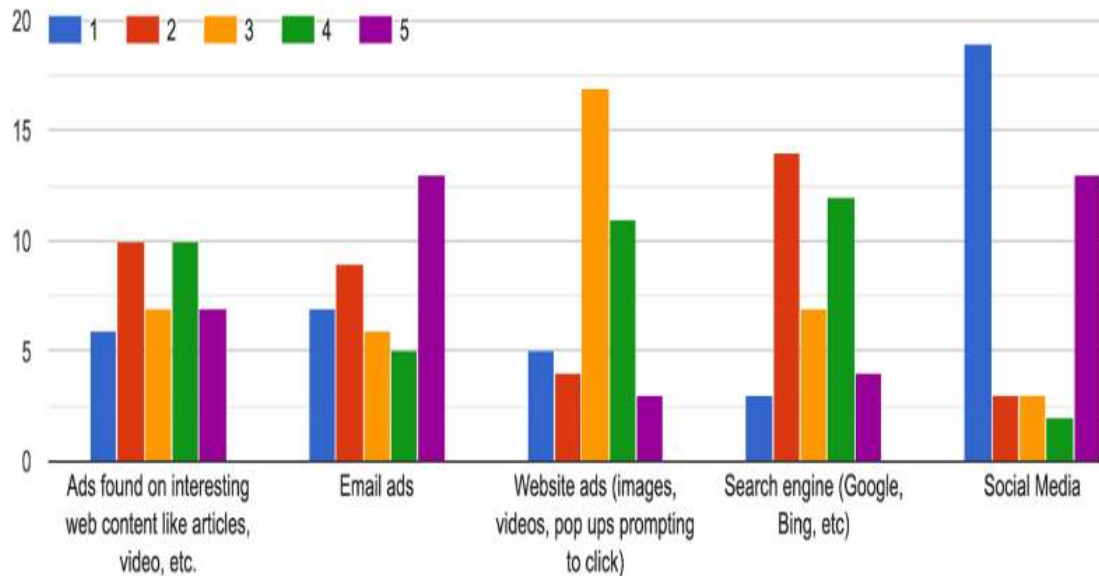
Further analysis using a chi-square test for independence aimed to establish a relationship between respondents' time spent on different online platforms and their buying behaviour. However, the results indicate statistically insignificant relationships, suggesting that factors beyond time spent on a particular online channel influence purchasing decisions more significantly. This contradicts the findings of Ahmed (2017), who observed a significant correlation between exposure to online marketing and stages in the purchase decision process. Smith (2016) similarly emphasized the importance of online exposure for marketers, although cautioning that other factors also play crucial roles in marketing success.

The differences in findings between this study and Osewe's (2013) research may be attributed to the evolving landscape of social media usage, with a significant increase in the number of social media users over the years. While Osewe's study highlighted email as the dominant online platform, this research underscores the dominance of social media in contemporary online behaviour.

Overall, the findings suggest that while social media usage plays a significant role in influencing purchase decisions, other factors also contribute to consumer behaviour. Further research is needed to explore these factors comprehensively and understand their implications for online marketing effectiveness.

4.4 P3: Consumers who spend more time on online marketing channels are more likely to make a purchase than those who do not

The third proposition of the study explored whether consumers who spend more time online were more likely to make purchases compared to those who spend less time online. The research aims to determine the relationship between users' exposure to online marketing channels, measured by their total time spent online, and their buying behaviour. As shown in Figure 6 below, findings indicate that the level of exposure to online marketing does not significantly impact consumers' likelihood to make purchases as only 15% of the respondents often or always make purchases.

Figure 6 Distribution of consumers by conviction to purchase
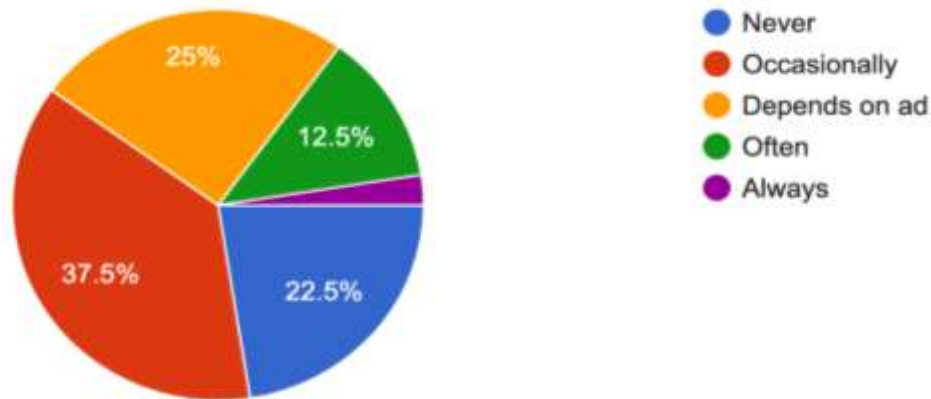
The analysis involved computing the total time spent online by each respondent and assessing their responses to online marketing in terms of their conviction to make a purchase.

These findings contrast with the observations of Cohen (2008), who found a significant impact of online marketing exposure on consumer buying behaviour. However, the research underscores the importance of understanding consumers' exposure levels to enable marketers to tailor their marketing strategies effectively. While exposure levels may not directly influence buying behaviour in this study, targeted marketing based on consumer needs and preferences can yield better results, as noted by Lasting Trend (2018).

Overall, further investigation is warranted to explore additional factors that directly affect buying behaviour, as exposure levels alone do not appear to have a significant relationship with purchasing decisions in this context.

V.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This research sought to investigate how online marketing influences the purchasing decisions of ZCAS University students. To execute the study, three propositions as outlined below were designed:

P1: Consumer purchase decisions are influenced by online marketing reach and consumer attitudes towards online marketing.

P2: Consumers respond effectively to online marketing channels where they spend the most time.

P3: Consumers who spend more time on online marketing channels are more likely to make a purchase than those who do not.

The first proposition of the study examined factors that influence consumers' purchase decisions, focusing on marketing reach and consumer attitudes towards online marketing. The findings indicate widespread awareness of online marketing among respondents, with 95% reporting encountering them. This suggests effective reach, with emphasis on marketing reach for brand awareness. Regarding attitudes, 80% of respondents' attitudes towards online marketing depend on the specific marketing activity, with 62.5% exhibiting a positive attitude. However, a chi-square test reveals no significant relationship between consumer attitudes and buying behaviour.

The second proposition investigates whether users respond more favourably to marketing on platforms where they spend more time. Social media emerges as the most used platform, followed by search engines, emails, websites, and e-commerce sites. Social media also influences purchase decisions the most, with 47.5% of respondents citing it as most influential. However, a chi-square test indicates statistically insignificant relationships between time spent on different platforms and buying behaviour. Factors beyond time spent online may influence purchasing decisions more significantly, with social media's dominance reflecting the evolving landscape of online behaviour.

The third proposition explores whether exposure to online marketing channels impacts purchasing decisions. Findings suggest no significant relationship between exposure and buying behaviour. While exposure levels may not directly influence buying behaviour, targeted marketing based on consumer preferences can yield better results. Further research is needed to understand additional factors affecting buying behaviour comprehensively.

5.2 Recommendations

1.Emphasize Marketing Reach for Brand Awareness: Given the widespread awareness of online marketing among respondents (95%), marketers should continue to prioritize marketing reach to enhance brand awareness. Investing in strategies that maximize the reach of online marketing across various platforms can effectively promote the university's brand to a broader audience.

2.Tailor Marketing to Specific Audiences: While most respondents (62.5%) exhibit a positive attitude towards online marketing, it is crucial for marketers to recognize that attitudes vary depending on the specific ad. Therefore, they should focus on creating tailored marketing that resonate with the preferences and interests of their target audience at ZCAS University.

3.Utilize Social Media Platforms Effectively: Given that social media emerges as the most used platform among respondents and influences purchase decisions the most (47.5%), marketers should prioritize their efforts on social media channels. Creating engaging and relevant content, leveraging influencer partnerships, and utilizing targeted marketing tools on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter can enhance engagement and drive desired actions among ZCAS University's target audience.

4.Explore Cross-Platform Integration: While social media holds significant influence, marketers should not overlook other online platforms such as search engines, emails, websites, and e-commerce sites. Exploring opportunities for cross-platform integration and consistent messaging can reinforce brand presence and enhance overall marketing effectiveness.

5.Implement Data-Driven Targeting: Since exposure to online marketing channels alone may not directly influence buying behaviour, marketers should leverage data-driven insights to target and personalize marketing based on consumer preferences and behaviours. Utilizing analytics tools to track user engagement, segment audiences, and optimize campaigns can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of marketing efforts.

6.Continuously Monitor and Adapt Strategies: Given the dynamic nature of consumer behaviour and online trends, marketers should continuously monitor the performance of their marketing campaigns and be prepared to adapt strategies accordingly. Regularly analysing key performance indicators (KPIs) such as engagement rates, conversion rates, and return on investment (ROI) can provide valuable insights for optimizing future marketing initiatives.

By incorporating these recommendations into their marketing strategies, marketers at ZCAS University can effectively leverage online marketing channels to engage their target audience, enhance brand awareness, and drive desired actions.

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