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Digital Marketing Transformation and Consumer Purchase Behaviour in Post-Pandemic Markets

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ABSTRACT: The rapid acceleration of digital marketing channels — including social media advertising, influencer partnerships, and personalised e-commerce experiences — has fundamentally reshaped consumer purchase behaviour in the post-pandemic era. This study examines how digital marketing strategies influence consumer trust, brand loyalty, and purchase intent across different demographic segments, with particular attention to the role of data-driven personalisation and targeted advertising. Drawing on survey data from 428 consumers and engagement analytics from 15 brands operating across multiple digital platforms, the paper investigates which marketing approaches most effectively convert online engagement into sustained purchasing behaviour. The findings reveal that personalisation strategies yield diminishing returns once consumers perceive excessive targeting, highlighting a critical balance point for marketers. The paper offers practical implications for marketing practitioners and contributes to consumer behaviour literature on trust and engagement in digitally-mediated markets.

Keywords: digital marketing, consumer behaviour, personalisation, purchase intent, brand loyalty, ad fatigue, post-pandemic, social media advertising

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed the most rapid transformation in consumer behaviour and digital commerce in modern history. Lockdowns and social distancing measures forced billions of consumers to shift purchasing behaviour online, compressing what analysts had projected as a decade of digital adoption into a period of months. E-commerce penetration rates that had been projected to reach 20% of total retail sales by 2025 were effectively achieved in 2020, and — crucially — sustained thereafter as new digital shopping habits embedded themselves in consumer routines (McKinsey, 2021).

For marketing practitioners, this transformation presented both opportunity and challenge. The migration of consumer attention to digital channels created unprecedented access to consumer data and targeting capabilities, enabling levels of marketing personalisation that were previously technically or economically unattainable. At the same time, the simultaneous migration of all consumers to digital channels intensified competition for online attention, driving up digital advertising costs and accelerating the emergence of phenomena such as ad fatigue, banner blindness, and consumer backlash against perceived data exploitation.

This paper investigates how digital marketing strategies have adapted to post-pandemic consumer behaviour patterns and examines the differential effectiveness of personalisation, social media marketing, influencer partnerships, and content marketing approaches in driving brand engagement, purchase intent, and customer lifetime value. By combining consumer survey data with brand-level engagement analytics, the study provides an empirical foundation for post-pandemic digital marketing strategy that moves beyond the practitioner literature's predominantly anecdotal evidence base.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Marketing Channels and Consumer Engagement

The digital marketing landscape encompasses a diverse ecosystem of channels — including search engine marketing (SEM), social media advertising, email marketing, content marketing, influencer partnerships, and programmatic display advertising — each with distinct engagement mechanisms and consumer response patterns. Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2019) propose a RACE (Reach, Act, Convert, Engage) framework for understanding consumer journeys across these channels, emphasising the importance of channel selection that reflects the specific stage of the customer relationship being targeted.

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2.2 Personalisation and Consumer Trust

Personalisation — the tailoring of marketing messages, product recommendations, and user experiences to individual consumer characteristics, preferences, and behaviours — has emerged as a central capability of digital marketing, enabled by the availability of granular consumer data from digital touchpoints. Research consistently finds that relevant, personalised communications generate higher engagement rates, conversion rates, and customer satisfaction scores than generic mass-market alternatives (Vesanen, 2007).

However, the relationship between personalisation and consumer response is not monotonic. The personalisation paradox — the simultaneous consumer desire for relevant personalisation and discomfort with the perceived surveillance that enables it — has been documented across multiple studies (Awad & Krishnan, 2006). Consumers exhibit a nuanced cost-benefit assessment of personalisation, accepting relevant recommendations when perceived benefits (convenience, relevance, time savings) outweigh perceived costs (privacy loss, manipulation risk, data exploitation). When this assessment shifts — typically when personalisation feels intrusive, unexpected, or unjustifiably knowledgeable — trust erodes and purchase intent declines.

2.3 Influencer Marketing and Parasocial Relationships

Influencer marketing — the use of social media personalities to promote products and brands to their follower communities — has grown from a peripheral marketing tactic to a mainstream channel with an estimated global market value of USD 21.1 billion in 2023 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). The effectiveness of influencer marketing draws on parasocial relationship theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), which describes the one-sided emotional bonds that media consumers form with media personalities. When consumers perceive an influencer as authentic, relatable, and genuinely enthusiastic about a product, the parasocial bond transfers positive affect to the endorsed brand, generating purchase intent through a social proof mechanism.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design combining a consumer survey with brand-level engagement analytics. The consumer survey was administered online to 428 adult respondents in the UK aged 18–55, recruited through a consumer panel platform (Prolific Academic) using quota sampling to ensure demographic representativeness by age, gender, and income. The survey was conducted in March 2024, capturing post-pandemic digital consumption patterns approximately two years after the lifting of major COVID restrictions.

3.2 Survey Measures

The survey instrument measured: digital channel usage frequency (seven channels rated on a 7-point frequency scale); personalisation receptivity (eight items adapted from Aguirre et al. (2015) measuring comfort with personalisation across different data types and use cases); perceived ad intrusiveness (five items from Ha (1996)); brand trust

(McKnight & Chervany (2001) validated scale); and purchase intent (three items from Dodds et al. (1991)). Social media engagement behaviour was captured through 12 items covering platform usage, content interaction, and influencer following behaviour.

3.3 Brand Analytics Data

Brand-level engagement analytics were obtained through partnerships with 15 UK consumer brands across fashion (n=4), food and beverage (n=4), consumer electronics (n=4), and beauty (n=3) categories. Data provided include 18 months of social media engagement metrics (reach, impressions, engagement rate, click-through rate), advertising performance data (cost per click, conversion rate, return on ad spend), email marketing metrics, and sales conversion funnel data, all anonymised and aggregated at the campaign level.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Channel Effectiveness and Purchase Intent

Regression analysis of survey data reveals significant variation in the contribution of different digital channels to purchase intent. Email marketing from brands to which respondents had explicitly subscribed shows the strongest association with purchase intent ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with the role of prior consent and relationship depth in mediating marketing effectiveness. Influencer content on Instagram and

YouTube shows the second strongest relationship ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), while paid social media advertising demonstrates a weaker and more variable association ($\beta =$

0.18, $p < 0.01$), moderated significantly by perceived ad relevance.

4.2 The Personalisation Inflection Point

A key finding is the identification of a personalisation inflection point beyond which increased personalisation intensity is associated with declining purchase intent. A quadratic regression of purchase intent on personalisation receptivity scores reveals a positive linear effect ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant negative quadratic term ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < 0.01$), indicating an inverted-U relationship. The inflection point occurs at approximately the 68th percentile of the personalisation intensity scale — equivalent to personalisation that includes browsing history-based recommendations and purchase reminder emails, but excludes cross-device tracking and social media behaviour-based retargeting.

4.3 Influencer Authenticity and Engagement Conversion

Brand analytics data reveal significant heterogeneity in the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. Micro-influencer campaigns (10,000–100,000 followers) generate average engagement rates of 4.7%, compared to 1.8% for macro-influencer campaigns (>1 million followers), consistent with the well-documented negative relationship between follower count and engagement rate. However, sales conversion rates (the proportion of link clicks resulting in completed purchases) are comparable across influencer tiers (micro: 2.3%, macro: 2.1%), suggesting that the higher reach of macro-influencers compensates for their lower engagement rate in absolute conversion terms.

4.4 Ad Fatigue and Frequency Effects

Analysis of paid social media campaign data reveals clear ad fatigue effects. Clickthrough rates decline significantly after the third impression within a 7-day window, falling from an average of 1.8% at first impression to 0.6% at the fifth impression (a 67% decline). Frequency-capped

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campaigns — limiting exposure to three impressions per user per week — consistently outperform uncapped campaigns on both clickthrough rate (1.4% vs 0.9%) and cost per conversion (£18.30 vs £27.40), confirming that media efficiency gains from frequency management substantially exceed the reach benefits of unrestricted frequency.

5. DISCUSSION

The identification of a personalisation inflection point has important strategic implications for digital marketing practitioners. The finding that personalisation beyond the 68th percentile intensity threshold is associated with declining purchase intent suggests that the marketing industry's dominant logic — more data enables better targeting, which enables better results — is incomplete and potentially counterproductive at scale. The consumer data suggesting that cross-device tracking and social media behaviour-based retargeting represent the primary triggers for the shift from personalisation appreciation to personalisation backlash aligns with regulatory trends in data privacy (GDPR in Europe, CCPA in California) and with the technology industry's movement toward privacy-preserving advertising architectures.

The relative effectiveness of email marketing — a comparatively 'old' digital channel — relative to paid social advertising reflects the enduring importance of consumer consent and relationship depth as mediators of marketing effectiveness. Opt-in email lists, while smaller in reach than paid social audiences, represent consumers who have explicitly signalled interest in brand communications, creating a fundamentally different and more receptive reception context. This finding supports permission marketing theory (Godin, 1999) and suggests that marketers' reallocation of budget toward paid social at the expense of email relationship development may have been strategically premature.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined digital marketing effectiveness in post-pandemic consumer markets, generating evidence on the differential contribution of digital channels to purchase intent, the existence and location of a personalisation inflection point, and the conversion effectiveness of influencer marketing tiers. The findings challenge several dominant assumptions in digital marketing practice: that more personalisation is always better; that higher follower counts translate to superior campaign returns; and that paid social media should anchor digital marketing investment.

For marketing practitioners, the strategic implications are clear. Digital marketing investment portfolios should prioritise channels that build and leverage genuine consumer relationships (email, loyalty programmes, community-based social media) over mass-reach interruption advertising, while treating personalisation as a tool to be applied with precision rather than maximised. Frequency management should be treated as a core media planning discipline rather than an afterthought, and influencer programme strategies should explicitly balance reach, engagement, and conversion objectives when making tier selection decisions. Future research should examine how these dynamics vary across cultural contexts and consumer generations to build a more complete and globally relevant picture of post-pandemic digital marketing effectiveness.

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