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A Comparative Study of Digital Marketing Channels and Their Influence on Consumer Buying Behaviour

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Abstract

Consumers now meet brands on social media, search engines, video platforms, e-mail and mobile alerts, but many firms still choose where to spend their advertising money without clear evidence. This study looks at how ad engagement, trust, brand awareness and offer attractiveness relate to consumers' intention to buy after seeing digital ads, and whether the likelihood of buying differs across four digital channels. A structured online questionnaire was filled in by 49 respondents. After screening, 46 complete responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, correlation, the Friedman test, multiple linear regression and the Kruskal–Wallis test. Average scores for all five measures were close to the neutral mid-point of 3 on a 5-point scale. The likelihood of buying did not differ significantly across the four channels, $\chi^2(3, N = 46) = 5.65$, $p = .130$, although e-mail / SMS / app alerts had the highest average (3.00). The regression model was significant and explained 77.3% of the variation in purchase intention, $F(4, 41) = 34.94$, $p < .001$. Offer attractiveness ($\beta = .61$) and ad engagement ($\beta = .62$) were the strongest predictors. Purchase intention did not differ by income group. Because the sample is small and the predictors overlap strongly, the findings should be treated as exploratory. They suggest that attractive offers and engaging content matter more than the choice of channel alone.

Keywords: digital marketing channels, consumer buying behaviour, purchase intention, ad engagement, trust, offer attractiveness, regression

1. Introduction

Digital media have changed how people find, compare and buy products. A shopper may see a product in a social media post, search for reviews on a search engine, watch a video advertisement and finally buy after getting a discount message by e-mail or on a phone app. Each of these touchpoints is a different digital marketing channel, and each works in its own way. Social media builds attention and conversation, search captures people who are already looking, video adds visual impact, and e-mail or app alerts keep a direct link with the customer.

Because digital spending can be measured, managers expect to know which channel works best. In practice the answer is not simple. Channels reach different people at different stages of the buying journey. Much of the earlier research studies one channel at a time, most often social media, so it is hard to compare channels using the same respondents and the same outcome. This study places several channels in one framework and also asks which consumer attitudes are linked most strongly with the intention to buy.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Firms invest in several digital channels at the same time, but there is limited comparative evidence on how these channels differ in their influence on buying behaviour, and on which consumer attitudes explain that influence. Without such evidence, budgets are often set by habit or by platform-reported numbers instead of by consumer data.

1.2 Objectives of the study

- To measure consumers' levels of ad engagement, trust, brand awareness, offer attractiveness and purchase intention.
- To test whether the likelihood of buying differs across four digital channels: social media / influencers, search engines, YouTube / video, and e-mail / SMS / app notifications.
- To find how far ad engagement, trust, brand awareness and offer attractiveness predict purchase intention.
- To examine whether purchase intention differs across income groups.
- To give recommendations on how to use digital marketing effort.

1.3 Scope and significance

The study covers people who answered an online questionnaire about how digital advertisements affect their buying. It is useful for marketers and small businesses deciding where to place limited budgets, and for students who want a simple and repeatable analysis. Its main value is that it compares channels and also explains the attitudes that sit behind purchase intention.

2. Review of Literature

This section reviews twelve earlier studies and works. They are grouped by theme: digital channels, social and influencer media, advertising value and trust, brand awareness and offers, and the buying journey.

2.1 Digital marketing channels

1. Kannan and Li (2017) describe digital marketing as a system in which firms, consumers and platforms meet through data-rich touchpoints. They note that these touchpoints differ in how much control the firm has over the message and in how they can be measured.

2. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) group the main channels into search marketing, social media, e-mail, display advertising and affiliate or influencer partnerships. Each channel has its own cost and its own role in the customer's journey, so channels should not be expected to give the same results.

2.2 Social media and influencer marketing

3. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as internet applications that let users create and share content. They explain the opportunities and challenges these platforms bring to firms.

4. Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that social media are a hybrid part of the promotional mix. Firms can speak to customers, but customers also speak to each other, so the firm has less control over the message. This peer-to-peer quality is one reason social content is often seen as more believable than ordinary advertising.

5. De Veirman et al. (2017) studied marketing through Instagram influencers. They found that an influencer's number of followers affects how popular and likeable the influencer seems, and that the fit between the influencer and the brand also matters.

6. Dwivedi et al. (2021) review the fast-growing research on digital and social media marketing. They point to engagement, trust and content quality as common themes and call for more studies that compare channels.

2.3 Advertising value and trust

7. Ducoffe (1996) studied advertising on the web and showed that people judge ads by their value to them. Ads seen as informative and entertaining were valued more, while ads seen as irritating were valued less. This supports the idea that engaging ads work better.

8. Gefen, Karahanna and Straub (2003) studied online shopping and found that trust in the online seller, together with how useful and easy the website seems, influences the intention to buy. Trust is therefore a key factor when people buy online.

2.4 Brand awareness and offers

9. Keller (1993) explained customer-based brand equity and showed that brand awareness, meaning how easily people recognise and recall a brand, is a basic part of a strong brand. Advertising is one way to build it.

10. Dodds, Monroe and Grewal (1991) showed that price discounts raise the value buyers see in a product and their willingness to buy. This supports the idea that attractive offers help purchase intention.

2.5 Consumer buying behaviour and the decision journey

11. Court et al. (2009) suggested that the consumer decision journey is a loop, in which consideration, evaluation and loyalty are shaped again and again by brand touchpoints. Buying is not a straight line from one ad to one purchase.

12. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) extended this into a customer-experience view that covers many touchpoints before, during and after the purchase. Kotler and Keller (2016) describe the basic buying process in a similar way: recognising a need, searching for information, comparing options, buying and judging the purchase. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour supports the use of purchase intention as a close predictor of actual behaviour, because intention reflects the motivation to act.

2.6 Research gap and conceptual framework

The literature describes the growth of each channel and the value of engagement, trust, awareness and offers, but fewer studies compare several channels in one sample and test these attitudes together. This study addresses that gap. The framework treats ad engagement, trust, brand awareness and offer attractiveness as the drivers of purchase intention. It also compares the stated likelihood of buying across four channels.

2.7 Hypotheses

$H0_1$ (null): There is no significant difference in the likelihood of buying across the four digital channels.

H1 (alternative): The likelihood of buying differs significantly across the four digital channels.

$H0_2$ (null): Ad engagement, trust, brand awareness and offer attractiveness do not significantly predict purchase intention.

H2 (alternative): Ad engagement, trust, brand awareness and offer attractiveness significantly predict purchase intention.

$H0_3$ (null): There is no significant difference in purchase intention across income groups.

H3 (alternative): Purchase intention differs significantly across income groups.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study uses a descriptive and cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach. A structured questionnaire collected data from respondents at one point in time.

3.2 Sample and data screening

The questionnaire was shared online as a form [state your sampling method, for example convenience sampling through messaging groups, and your city or region]. In total, 49 respondents submitted answers. Three of them left all the rating questions blank, so they were removed. This left **46 usable responses**. A few respondents skipped one or two individual statements (three skipped Question 26 and three skipped Question 35). Their scores were averaged using the statements they did answer.

The original data file also contained 42 extra rows that were clearly marked as computer-generated (synthetic) and not from real participants. These rows were **left out of every analysis** and are not part of the sample.

Ten of the 46 respondents (21.7%) gave the same rating to all 23 statements, a pattern known as straight-lining. Their answers were kept in the main analysis, and the results were checked again without them (Section 5.5).

3.3 Instrument and variables

The questionnaire first asked about monthly income (or pocket money) and about the respondent's online habits and shopping. It then measured five variables with 23 statements on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Each variable is the average of its statements (Table 1).

Table 1: Variables and measurement

Variable	Statements	Example statement	Used for
Ad engagement	Q14–Q17 (4)	I click on digital ads when they interest me.	Predictor
Trust	Q18–Q21 (4)	I feel safe buying from brands that advertise online.	Predictor
Brand awareness	Q22–Q25 (4)	Digital ads help me remember brand names.	Predictor
Offer attractiveness	Q26–Q29 (4)	Discounts and deals in digital ads attract me.	Predictor
Likelihood to buy by channel	Q30–Q33 (4, one each)	I am likely to buy a product I find through search engine ads.	Channel comparison
Purchase intention	Q34–Q36 (3)	I plan to buy products that I see in digital ads in the future.	Outcome
Monthly income	Q5	Below ₹10,000 / ₹10,000–25,000 / ₹25,001–50,000 / above ₹50,000	Group comparison

Source: Author's questionnaire.

3.4 Statistical tools

The data were analysed with Python (pandas and SciPy). The same results can be reproduced in Microsoft Excel. The following methods were used at the 5% significance level ($\alpha = .05$).

- **Cronbach's alpha** to check whether the statements in each variable measure the same idea (Cronbach, 1951). A value of .70 or more is usually accepted (Nunnally, 1978).
- **Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation** to describe the scores and the links between variables.
- **Friedman test** to compare the four channel-wise likelihood scores. This test is used when the same people rate several items (Friedman, 1937). Pairs were compared with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests and a Bonferroni correction. Kendall's W was used as the effect size.
- **Multiple linear regression** (least squares) to test how far the four attitudes predict purchase intention (H2). Variance inflation factors (VIF) were checked for overlap between predictors (Hair et al., 2019).
- **Kruskal–Wallis test** to compare purchase intention across income groups (H3), because some groups were very small.

4. Sample Profile and Descriptive Results

Table 2 shows the income profile of the 46 respondents. Most (71.7%) reported a monthly income or pocket money below ₹10,000, so the sample is mainly made up of people with low personal income.

Table 2: Monthly income of respondents (N = 46)

Monthly income (or pocket money)	Frequency	Percent
Below ₹10,000	33	71.7%
₹10,000 – 25,000	4	8.7%
₹25,001 – 50,000	7	15.2%
Above ₹50,000	2	4.3%
Total	46	100.0%

Source: Primary data.

Table 3 gives the reliability and the average score of each variable. All five scales were reliable (alpha from .82 to .93). The average scores were all close to the neutral mid-point of 3. One-sample t-tests showed that none of them differed significantly from 3 (p between .30 and .93). In simple words, respondents were on average neither strongly for nor strongly against digital ads. Opinions were split: for every variable, about 35–43% agreed (rated 4 or 5) and about 39–49% disagreed (rated 1 or 2).

Table 3: Reliability and descriptive statistics (N = 46)

Variable	Items	Alpha	Mean	Std. dev.	Agree (4–5)	Disagree (1–2)
Ad engagement	4	.82	2.87	1.10	38.6%	45.1%
Trust	4	.93	2.98	1.23	37.0%	39.1%
Brand awareness	4	.93	2.95	1.33	42.4%	42.4%
Offer attractiveness	4	.93	2.80	1.26	35.4%	48.6%
Purchase intention	3	.93	2.97	1.31	38.5%	48.1%

Source: Primary data. Percentages are based on all item responses within each variable; the remainder answered 3 (neutral).

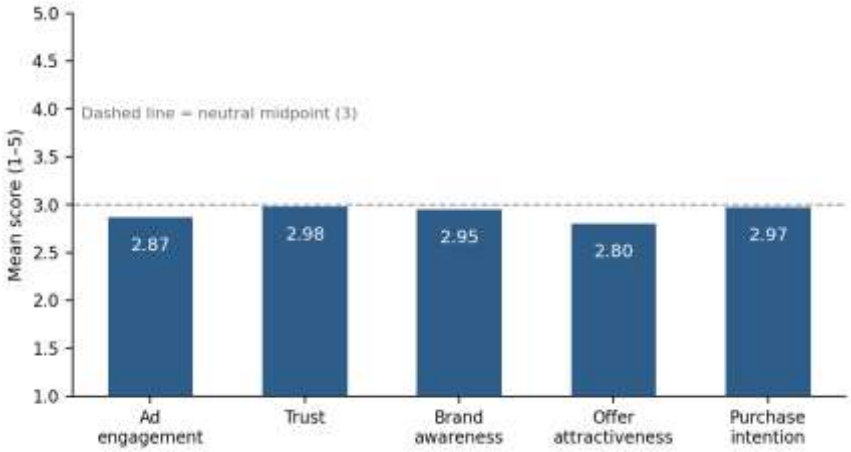


Figure 1: Mean score of each variable (N = 46)

At item level, the highest averages were for "Digital ads hold my attention" (3.15), "I would recommend products seen in digital ads to others" (3.14) and "I prefer buying from brands I know through digital ads" (3.13). The lowest were for "Discounts and deals in digital ads attract me" (2.51) and "I often like, comment on or share digital ads" (2.65).

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

5.1 Relationships between the variables

Table 4 shows that all variables were strongly and positively linked (r from .73 to .93, all p < .001). The links between the four predictors were very strong, for example ad engagement and trust (r = .93). This overlap matters for the regression in Section 5.3.

Table 4: Pearson correlations (N = 46; all p < .001)

	Engagement	Trust	Awareness	Offer	Intention
Ad engagement	1				
Trust	.93	1			
Brand awareness	.86	.88	1		
Offer attractiveness	.73	.81	.87	1	
Purchase intention	.76	.74	.83	.83	1

Source: Primary data.

5.2 Friedman test: likelihood of buying across channels (H1)

H0: The likelihood of buying is the same for all four channels. Table 5 shows the average score for each channel. E-mail / SMS / app alerts had the highest average (3.00) and 39.1% of respondents agreed they were likely to buy through it. Search engine ads had the lowest average (2.70) and the lowest share of agreement (23.9%).

Table 5: Likelihood of buying by channel (N = 46)

Channel	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean rank	Agree (4–5)
Social media (including influencers)	2.72	1.56	2.40	32.6%
Search engine ads	2.70	1.36	2.41	23.9%
YouTube / video ads	2.74	1.29	2.47	28.3%
E-mail / SMS / app notifications	3.00	1.46	2.72	39.1%

Source: Primary data. Friedman test: $\chi^2(3, N = 46) = 5.65$, $p = .130$, Kendall's $W = .04$.

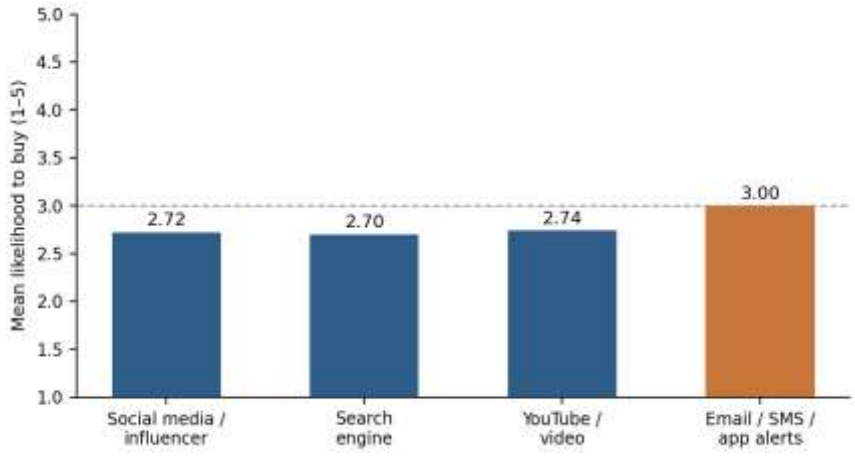


Figure 2: Mean likelihood of buying by channel (N = 46)

Interpretation. The Friedman test was not significant, $\chi^2(3) = 5.65$, p = .130, and the effect size was very small (W = .04). H0 is therefore not rejected and **H1 is not supported**. Without any correction, e-mail / SMS / app alerts scored higher than social media (p = .034) and search (p = .048). However, after the Bonferroni correction for six comparisons

none of the pairs was significant (adjusted p from .20 to 1.00; Table 6). The higher score for e-mail / SMS / app alerts is an interesting pattern, but this sample is too small to confirm it.

Table 6: Pairwise comparisons of channels (Wilcoxon signed-rank)

Pair	p-value	Adjusted p (Bonferroni)
E-mail / SMS / app vs Social media	.034	.202
E-mail / SMS / app vs Search	.048	.287
E-mail / SMS / app vs YouTube / video	.080	.480
Social media vs Search	.971	1.000
Social media vs YouTube / video	.820	1.000
Search vs YouTube / video	.564	1.000

Source: Primary data.

5.3 Multiple regression: drivers of purchase intention (H2)

H0: Ad engagement, trust, brand awareness and offer attractiveness do not significantly predict purchase intention. The model estimated was: Purchase intention = b0 + b1(Ad engagement) + b2(Trust) + b3(Brand awareness) + b4(Offer attractiveness) + e.

Table 7: Regression results (dependent variable: purchase intention, N = 46)

Predictor	B	Std. error	Std. beta	t	p-value	95% CI	VIF
Intercept	0.111	0.282		0.39	.696	−0.46, 0.68	
Ad engagement	0.733	0.269	.62	2.73	.009	0.19, 1.28	9.20
Trust	−0.556	0.257	−.52	−2.16	.037	−1.08, −0.04	10.61
Brand awareness	0.222	0.204	.23	1.09	.283	−0.19, 0.63	7.75
Offer attractiveness	0.628	0.169	.61	3.72	< .001	0.29, 0.97	4.81

Source: Primary data. $R = .879$, $R^2 = .773$, adjusted $R^2 = .751$, standard error = 0.652, $F(4, 41) = 34.94$, $p < .001$. Durbin–Watson = 1.90.

Interpretation. The model is significant and explains 77.3% of the variation in purchase intention (adjusted $R^2 = .751$), which is a large effect by Cohen's (1988) benchmarks. Looking at each predictor:

- **Offer attractiveness** ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$) and **ad engagement** ($\beta = .62$, $p = .009$) are positive and significant. People who find offers attractive and who engage with ads report a higher intention to buy.
- **Brand awareness** is not significant ($p = .283$) once the other three variables are in the model.
- **Trust** has a significant but negative coefficient ($\beta = -.52$, $p = .037$). This should not be read as "trust lowers intention". On its own, trust is positively linked with intention ($r = .74$). The negative sign appears because trust overlaps almost completely with ad engagement ($r = .93$).

The overlap between predictors is a real concern. The VIF values (4.8 to 10.6) are high, and a VIF above 10 is usually taken as a warning (Hair et al., 2019). This means the model as a whole is more reliable than the size of any single coefficient. The residuals were slightly non-normal (Shapiro–Wilk $p = .032$) but there were no extreme outliers (largest standardised residual 2.13). The ratio of about 11 cases per predictor is above the minimum of 5 but below the 15–20 that is preferred (Hair et al., 2019). **H2 is partly supported**: the model is significant, but only engagement and offer attractiveness are clear individual predictors.

5.4 Kruskal–Wallis test: income groups (H3)

H0: Purchase intention is the same across income groups. Table 8 shows that the group averages were close to each other, except for the small ₹10,000–25,000 group (n = 4). The test was not significant, H(3) = 1.32, p = .724, so H0 is not rejected and **H3 is not supported**. Two groups have only 4 and 2 respondents, so this test has very little power.

Table 8: Purchase intention by income group

Monthly income	n	Mean	Std. dev.
Below ₹10,000	33	3.01	1.44
₹10,000 – 25,000	4	2.33	0.67
₹25,001 – 50,000	7	3.14	1.10
Above ₹50,000	2	3.00	0.00

Source: Primary data.

5.5 Robustness check without straight-lined responses

To see whether careless answering changed the results, the analysis was repeated after removing the 10 respondents who gave the same rating to every statement (n = 36). Table 9 shows that the conclusions stay the same. The model is still significant, engagement and offer attractiveness remain the main predictors, and the channel and income tests remain non-significant.

Table 9: Main results with and without straight-lined responses

Result	All usable (n = 46)	Without straight-liners (n = 36)
Regression R^2 (adjusted R^2)	.773 (.751)	.682 (.641)
Regression F, p	$F(4, 41) = 34.94$, $p < .001$	$F(4, 31) = 16.66$, $p < .001$
Ad engagement (β, p)	.62, p = .009	.60, p = .029
Trust (β, p)	−.52, p = .037	−.55, p = .055
Brand awareness (β, p)	.23, p = .283	.21, p = .405
Offer attractiveness (β, p)	.61, p < .001	.63, p = .003
Friedman test (channels), p	.130	.130
Kruskal–Wallis (income), p	.724	.297

Source: Primary data

.6. Summary of Findings

Table 10: Summary of hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Test	Key result	Decision
H1: Likelihood to buy differs across channels ($H0_1$: no difference)	Friedman test	$\chi^2(3) = 5.65$, p = .130	Not supported
H2: Engagement, trust, awareness and offers predict intention ($H0_2$: no prediction)	Multiple regression	$R^2 = .773$, $F(4, 41) = 34.94$, $p < .001$	Partly supported
H3: Intention differs by income group ($H0_3$: no difference)	Kruskal–Wallis	H(3) = 1.32, p = .724	Not supported

Source: Primary data.

- Respondents were neutral on average. Scores for engagement, trust, awareness, offers and intention were all between 2.80 and 2.98.
- The likelihood of buying was similar across social media, search, video and e-mail / SMS / app alerts. E-mail / SMS / app alerts were slightly ahead (3.00), but the gap was not statistically significant.
- Offer attractiveness and ad engagement were the strongest individual predictors of purchase intention. Together with trust and awareness they explained about three quarters of its variation.
- Income made no significant difference to purchase intention.

7. Discussion

The results do not show a clear winner among the four channels. This agrees with the idea that channels do different jobs at different points in the buying journey (Court et al., 2009; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), and that no single channel suits every consumer. The slightly higher score for e-mail / SMS / app alerts fits the view that direct messages work well because they come from a brand the person already knows. This is only a hint, and it needs a larger sample to confirm.

The regression result is the most useful. Respondents who found offers attractive and who engaged with ads were more likely to say they plan to buy. This agrees with earlier work that stresses engagement as a key part of digital marketing success (Dwivedi et al., 2021), and with the link between intention and behaviour in the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). It is interesting that the offer statements had the lowest average score (2.80), and yet offer attractiveness was one of the strongest predictors. A possible reading is that offers do not appeal to everyone, but they matter a great deal to the people who do respond to ads.

The very high correlations between variables should be read with care. Respondents who rated one group of statements high tended to rate every group high. This can happen when people are positive or negative about digital ads in general, and it may be made stronger by the straight-lined answers. It is also the reason why trust and awareness did not show a clear separate effect. The study therefore cannot say that trust is unimportant. It can only say that, in this sample, trust could not be separated from engagement.

8. Implications and Recommendations

8.1 Managerial implications

- **Put offers and engagement first.** Clear, attractive offers and content that people want to click, watch or share were linked most strongly with the intention to buy. Plan the message before choosing the channel.
- **Do not rely on one channel.** No channel was significantly better than the others. Test two or three channels with small budgets and compare the real results.
- **Try e-mail, SMS and app alerts.** They had the highest average likelihood of buying and are usually low in cost. Test this with your own customers before making a large shift in budget.
- **Keep building trust.** Trust did not show a separate effect here, but it moved together with engagement. Reviews, honest claims and safe checkout remain good practice.
- **Measure intention and actual sales together,** not only clicks and views.

8.2 Theoretical implications

The study supports the view that attitudes such as engagement and offer appeal are shared across channels and help explain purchase intention. It also shows that these attitudes are closely related to each other, so future models should consider combining them or testing how they influence each other, for example with structural equation modelling.

9. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

Several limitations should be kept in mind.

- **Small sample.** Only 46 responses were analysed. Small samples give wide confidence intervals and can miss real differences, especially in the channel and income tests.

- **Sampling.** [Confirm your method.] If convenience sampling was used, the results cannot be generalised. The sample is also mostly low-income (71.7% below ₹10,000 a month), so it may not represent all online shoppers.
- **Response quality.** About 22% of respondents gave the same rating to every statement, and the variables were very strongly correlated.
- **Overlapping predictors.** High VIF values make individual regression coefficients unstable, and the negative sign for trust should not be taken at face value.
- **Data fields not analysed.** The questionnaire also asked about the channel used most, the latest purchase channel, purchase in the last six months and other habits, but these answers were not available in the dataset. The planned tests of channel against actual purchase and of age group against channel preference could therefore not be done. Channels were compared only through stated likelihood to buy.
- **Self-reported and cross-sectional data.** The results show association, not cause, and may be affected by recall and social desirability bias.

Future studies could use a larger probability sample, include actual purchase data and age, and use structural equation modelling to test how engagement, trust and offers work together.

10. Conclusion

This study looked at how engagement, trust, awareness and offers relate to the intention to buy after seeing digital ads, and whether the likelihood of buying differs across four digital channels. Using 46 usable survey responses, it found that respondents were neutral on average, that the four channels did not differ significantly, and that income did not matter. The four attitudes together explained 77% of the variation in purchase intention, and offer attractiveness and ad engagement stood out as the strongest individual predictors. For businesses, the message is to focus on strong offers and engaging content, and to test channels instead of assuming one is best. Because of the small sample and overlapping predictors, these findings should be confirmed with a larger and more varied sample.

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