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I WASN'T INFORMED OF THAT!! The Immorality of Deceptive Prices and Hidden Fees in Digital Marketing



Abstract: - Current study aimed at examining the ethical stands of digital marketing and organizations' approaches to manipulate their fees and prices when using digital marketing in terms of (psychological effect, consumer awareness, trust and credibility, purchase decision making, customer loyalty and relationship, business reputation). The study hypothesized that "ethics of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization". Realizing study's main hypothesis was done depending on quantitative methodology and utilizing a questionnaire which was self-administered by (431) individuals. Results of analysis accepted the main hypothesis and it appeared that hidden fees and manipulated prices may negatively influence customers' attitudes towards the organization and impact their future engagement with it. Among the chosen sub-variables, it was seen that the most influenced factor was consumer awareness as hidden prices in digital marketing have impact on consumer awareness when for some reason the customer is not informed of these hidden costs then they are left with perceptions that are completely misplaced as to the actual cost that they are likely to incur. This lack of transparency is particularly understandable as it can inadvertently contribute to confusion and annoyance as customers may be perceived to be duped by a business. Thus, their ability to discern the reality of the cost that is associated with a particular product or service is affected considerably.

Study recommended running a digital marketing strategy that is based on transparency and continuous disclosure for the benefit of organizational reputation.

Keywords: Hidden Fees, Psychological Effect, Consumer Awareness, Trust and Credibility, Purchase Decision Making, Customer Loyalty and Relationship, Business Reputation, Manipulation, Digital Marketing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing appeared to provide organizations with a golden opportunity to be as vivid and clear as they wish to be. The advances in the digital world bring out many wonders in a form of tools and platforms that can be leveraged to spread the message of the business and its unique value proposition in the most effective manner possible (Ilyas et al., 2021). In the modern world, people tend to get bored easily; that is why, having colorful and attractive websites, as well as good videos, and other materials that can attract the target audience and create an impressive image are crucial for organizations. When an organization is able to convey a clear and concise message, they are able to convey USPs (unique selling point), the advantages and benefits of their organization. In addition, a digital marketing channel like social media, email marketing or advertising through search engine marketing can target and personalize correctly within the right time. As suggested by the branding techniques, proper and engaging stories, and effective calls to action, organizations can develop a clear and lasting picture in the minds of customers, which will lead to increased engagement, conversions as well as customers' loyalty (Nofal et al., 2020).

Mohammad (2022) noted that organizations' stand to benefit numerous benefits from engaging in digital marketing, but at the same time, get exposed to certain risks such as the possibility of influencing the price. A number of strategies may be employed by organizations when they want to adjust the prices and fees in the course of using the concepts of digital marketing (Habib et al., 2022). Dynamic pricing is another practice which comes under the context of flexible pricing where prices are changed according to the real time scanner fed data such as demand, customer response, or competitor's price. By the use of advanced computer science and data analysis, an organization can make more profits by forcing different prices to different customer groups. Furthermore, there are various psychological factors that organizations may use in pricing strategies for instance 'charm prices'. g. This can be through offering an item at a cheaper price that a competitor is selling at a slightly higher price (e. g. \$9. 99 instead of \$10) or through using options such as limited time offers or countdown timers (Santo and Marques, 2022). Another technique through which organizations influence prices is through charges or surcharges which are often not easily noticed or easily discovered. Such fees may be added when the customer is at check out, meaning that they never anticipated the extra charges. Of course, even some of the manipulations are legal and widely used in business; however, the organizations should

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avoid any manipulations that violate the trust of the customer and should stick to ethical principles in the digital marketplace (Khan et al., 2022).

According to the argument above, we can identify the gap based on the fact that

From that point, the current study was carried out as an approach to

For study sake, we have developed a model that highlighted relationship between study's variables and from which study hypotheses were extracted:

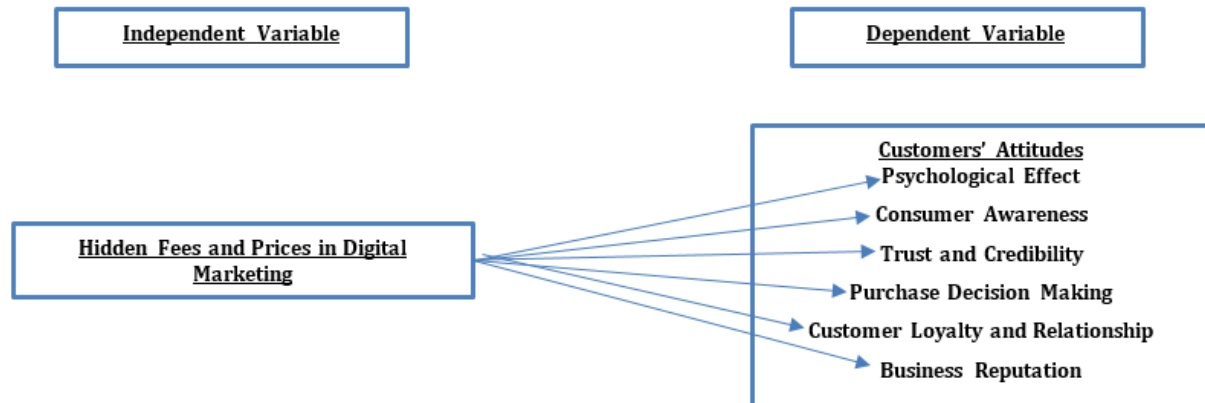


Figure 1. Study Model (Stravinskienė et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021)

According to study model above, we can say that the study hypothesizes the following:

H: Ethics of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

Sub-Hypotheses of study included:

H1: Psychological effect of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

H2: Consumer awareness of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

H3: Trust and credibility of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

H4: Purchase decision making of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

H5: Customer loyalty and relationship of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

H6: Business reputation of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing has brought a new dimension of advertisement that has changed the face of business promotion. In light of the current progression of technology and the integration of the internet in our daily lives, digital marketing has emerged as an influential marketing concept (Saura, 2021). Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021) defined digital marketing as the process of promoting a brand, service or product on the internet. Olson et al. (2021) noted that digital marketing on the other hand uses any form of media that operates through internet and technology such as websites, search engines, social media, email and mobile applications among others. It provides the chance to advertise to a certain population and to give messages that may be more relevant to them, while also being able to monitor and evaluate campaign outcomes within real-time (Kingsnorth, 2022). The use of digital marketing helps the firms to establish customer relations across the world, eliminating the geographical limitations and increased market area. It also creates an avenue for cheap marketing since expenses incurred in the use of digital platforms are often cheaper than those of traditional media (Veleva and Tsvetanova, 2022). The new form of marketing called digital marketing has brought about the change in the marketing field, enabling firms to communicate with the customers more effectively and survive in the new form of the digital world (Krishen et al., 2021).

Fees and Prices within Digital Marketing

Long and Liu (2024) argued that companies employ different approaches in online marketing to ensure that they put forward their fees and prices in the web. One of the most popular methods is by making exclusive pricing pages on their official websites. The contents of these pages include information about the corporation's offerings, including its products or services, and straightforward, easily comprehensible price lists. Companies might have different prices to target different customer segments or offer packages depending on the price range. They may also advertise any issues concerning special sale, discount or any promotion to known or potential buyers (Veleva and Tsvetanova, 2020). Moreover, businesses use emails to inform their subscribers about the pricing details through their email marketing lists, thus offering them a special deal on the new prices or the changes made to the existing prices. Social media also comes in handy too, because through it, companies can share articles and other information relating to pricing, and customers can leave comments on the articles and even inbox the companies (Spencer, 2020). Another related advertising technique that can be adopted is the PPC ads which can be used to present particular aspects of the pricing structure and lead people to the websites of the organization. Hence, when adopting these digital marketing approaches, organizations can present their fees and prices clearly online and engage potential customers through appropriate advertising techniques (He et al., 2022).

Hidden Surprises

Puthussery (2020) argues that digital marketing has been able to give organizations the possibility of direct access and continuous interaction with the consumer for marketing purposes. However, it has been noted that most organizations tend to adopt unethical practices in digital marketing, such as including hidden costs and lack of clarity in the prices offered. Li and Li (2023) pointed out that these practices are usually unnoticed to the consumer, and he is usually surprised at the end of the shopping process, which may negatively impact the purchase intention, the decision to purchase and repurchase, or even reach a stage where support is mobilized in order to create content against the organizations that adopt these practices. As a means of fighting it and thus losing its competitiveness, market share, customer loyalty and satisfaction. Yang et al (2022) argued that the most important practices of hiding prices or manipulating costs that organizations tend to adopt are:

- Shiny and attractive offers

These offers are usually designed to attract consumers, such as “buy one, get one free”, “buy at half price”, “real discounts”. However, in reality, the price of the product has previously been raised in order to compensate for the discount rate

- Misleading advertisements

These advertisements are usually manipulated through image enhancement programs in order to show the product in a beautiful and acceptable image. The shape or size is usually manipulated so that consumers are surprised when they receive the product that it is completely different from their expectations.

- Fees added at the end of the purchase process

These fees represent the additional financial costs that appear at the end of the purchasing process after the organization has offered its products at reasonable and attractive prices. These fees include delivery costs, additional taxes, service fees, and other matters that may not be understood by customers, but they are surprised by them.

- Discounts with conditions

Some organizations offer attractive discounts to customers, but these discounts are linked to specific conditions that consumers must fulfill in order to obtain the discount. This includes obtaining a paid membership, purchasing large quantities of the product, or additional costs that must be paid.

Visser et al. (2021) noted that hidden fees and prices of organizations marketing through digital marketing can have a lot of negative impact on the organization and its ability to manage its relationship with customers. Such influence may reach reputation of the organization, customers' attitude towards recommending the organization and the possibilities of word of mouth which would decrease over time. Biswas et al. (2023) and Deshmukh and Patil (2021) stated that hidden prices and fees in digital marketing has a lot of negative effect on aspects of organizational relationship to the market and customers which included:

- Psychological Effect

Such factors as hidden prices and fees may have a negative impact on the psychological aspects of the customer's perception. When customers get caught off guard by additional costs during the last stages of the sales process, they may feel particularly betrayed, which can evoke frustration, disappointment, or even anger.

- *Consumer Awareness*

Potential hidden costs and charges can affect the perceived level of awareness among consumers. Some customers may be blind to the total price, thinking that the first number is cheaper than it actually is because of the extra charges that one will not know about. This may cause the workers to lose confidence in the organization and perceive the value of what they are offering or receiving in a poor light.

- *Trust and Credibility*

This may include administration fees, subscription fees, transaction charges, hidden costs and other charges all of which will hinder the credibility of the organization if not efficiently dealt with. When customers are offered hidden charges it creates a feeling of distrust due to the fact that the business has been partial with important information. This can sometime reduce customer confidence and they may shy away from any other transactions that they wish to conduct in the future.

- *Purchase Decision Making*

Unexpected costs and charges may have a great impact on the choice of products. The public may also bail out on a product or look for a different one if they find hidden costs. Some of the possible consequences of having hidden fees include: The confusion and uncertainty resulting from hidden fees are likely to affect the buying process of the customer which results to loss making for the organization(Hashem, 2019a;Hashem, 2019b).

- *Customer Loyalty and Relationship*

When charges are hidden or conveyed in a complex manner, customers will be frustrated and the bond between the customer and the organization will suffer. Customers also get a chance to feel like they have been cheated or even misled and this makes it very difficult to encourage the same customers to continue doing business with the firm in the future(Ajina, et al., 2023; Joudeh, et al. 2020).

- *Business Reputation*

In the same way additional costs and charges may be ruinous to a business's image. People are very quick to spread information regarding hidden costs either through word of mouth or through writing a review online, this will be detrimental to the organization as they will have a bad reputation. This may help to dissuade prospective customers from interacting with the business making it have long term implications on its success.

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

Current study depended on collecting primary data through quantitative approach. The primary data was collected utilizing a questionnaire that was built by researcher. The questionnaire appeared in two main sections, the first took into account demographics of study sample, while the other section presented statements related to study's variables. The questionnaire was built on Likert 5-point scale and in order to check its validity, it was presented before a group of experts in the field for arbitration. The questionnaire in its final version consisted of (47) statements as according to the following table:

Table 1. Distribution of Statements on Sub-Variables

Variable	# of Statements
Psychological Effect	8
Consumer Awareness	7
Trust And Credibility	9
Purchase Decision Making	7
Customer Loyalty And Relationship	9
Business Reputation	7

Population of study consisted of customers. A convenient sample of (500) was chosen to represent the study's population. For data collection, we have uploaded the questionnaire on Google Forms. After application process, researcher was able to retrieve (431) properly filled questionnaires which indicated a response rate of (86.2%) as statistically accepted.

Dealing with collected primary data was done through statistical package for social science (SPSS). Demographics were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentages, mean and standard deviation of questionnaire responses were presented, and hypotheses were tested through multiple and linear regression for acceptance/rejection.

IV. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Demographics

Demographics of respondents included (gender, age, qualification, occupation and income). Results of frequency and percentages indicated that majority of respondents were females forming 55.9% of total sample who were within age range of 18-28 years old forming 56.8%. Results also indicated that majority of respondents held BA forming 62.4% with the majority of them being students forming 61.7% of the total sample. Regarding income, it was seen that majority of respondents had an income that ranged between \$1000-\$2000 forming 63.8% of the total sample.

Table 2. Demographic Results

Variable	f	%
Gender		
Male	190	44.1
Female	241	55.9
Age		
18-28	245	56.8
29-39	42	9.7
40-50	68	15.8
51-59	21	4.9
51-60	41	9.5
+60	14	3.2
Qualification		
BA	269	62.4
Less than diploma	27	6.3
PhD	54	12.5
MA	81	18.8
Occupation		
Housewife	15	3.5
Business owner	24	5.6
Student	266	61.7
Retired	13	3.0
Employee	113	26.2
Income/\$		
1000-2000	275	63.8
More than 2000	16	3.7
Less than 2000	140	32.5
Total	431	100.0

When respondents were asked "Have you ever bought any service/product over the internet through the past 12 months?" and results indicated that 97.2% of them have bought an item of the internet through the past 12 months.

Table 3. Have you ever bought any service/product over the internet through the past 12 months?

	f	%
No	12	2.8
Yes	419	97.2
Total	431	100.0

When they were asked "Do you think that products marketed on the Internet are a scam?" responses were that 60.1% of respondents didn't believe that products marketed through the internet are a scam.

Table 4. Do you think that products marketed on the Internet are a scam?

	f	%
No	259	60.1
Yes	172	39.9
Total	431	100.0

Questionnaire Analysis

Responses to questionnaire items were calculated in terms of mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ). Results indicated as in the table below that all items were positively received as they all scored higher than mean of scale 3.00. the highest mean was scored by “**Consumer Awareness**” **4.33/5.00** compared to the least mean which was scored by “trust and credibility” with 3.77/5.00 but still positive as it scored higher than mean of scale.

Table 5. Questionnaire Analysis

	μ	σ	α
I feel angry when digital ads try to make a fool of me	4.749	.484	0.733
Digital ads is the reason why I don't shop online	3.884	.905	
I don't respect ads that seeks to gain financial profit over customers' interest	4.193	1.140	
It is depressing to go through all steps then be encountered with feed that are not mentioned before	4.585	.825	
Once, I was encountered with an unexpected fee at my door step, it was embarrassing	4.077	1.193	
Even delivery employees have no idea about hidden fees which makes me feel sad for them	3.889	1.102	
It is frustrating to have the comfort of your item being delivered to you but still there is a scam behind it	4.684	.597	
I had many times of regret due to online purchasing as it was deceptive	3.898	1.116	
Psychological Effect	4.245	.563	0.845
I spot a deceptive price product ad as soon as I see it	4.434	.685	
I now that social media ads prices aren't real	4.088	.773	
I think low prices can be attributed to the non-existence of physical stores, so there are no operating expenses	4.281	.581	
I have never believed in digital marketing prices, they aren't real	3.921	.939	
Digital marketer exaggerate in their ads because there is a hidden bait	4.499	.617	
When I suspect a certain price I immediately go to comments section	4.731	.508	
I am always aware of deceptive prices, I always expect hidden fees	4.390	.745	
Consumer Awareness	4.335	.508	0.966
I see a price, when I make an order the bill differs immediately	4.267	.689	
No wonder we still have physical stores, digital marketing prices aren't trustworthy	3.775	1.142	
I had many fights before with marketers due to fees I wasn't informed of	3.385	1.572	
When I make a call, even there operators aren't truthful	3.933	.931	
If I make any comment or review about the price, they immediately remove it	3.729	1.124	
Even if it wasn't a scam, I still do not recommend it	3.775	1.165	
I don't trust online marketers, they lie to me right in my face	3.935	.933	
I am not loyal to any brand that doesn't have an actual store	3.448	1.565	

	μ	σ	α
I think it's all about luck, it is more of gambling than shopping	3.759	1.431	
Trust and Credibility	3.778	1.070	
The fact that I suspected a price discourages me from making a purchase	3.993	1.075	
Making a purchase decision is always troublesome, there is always a place where they scam me	4.128	.816	
It makes me angry when I make a purchase and I am surprised with unmentioned fees	4.186	.764	
Even if I check comments and reviews section, I still hesitate to make a purchase	4.153	1.159	
I have never been recommended to make a purchase from a friend or a family from online ads	3.731	1.192	0.901
It seems that all people hesitate to buy from them due to their deceptive actions	4.139	.792	
When there is a huge difference between the ads price and other prices, I don't buy it	4.174	.772	
Purchase Decision Making	4.072	.758	
I never buy something online, especially with a suspected price	4.137	.794	
Even if I was happy with a purchase, I hesitate when taking the decision once again	3.961	1.234	
I always deter from making a purchase from online ads	3.536	1.206	
There is always something missing in the ad, delivery, tax, VAT	4.306	.862	
Operators do not care about their customers to tell them the truth	4.146	.804	
The last time I ordered something, the receipt was different from the announced price	3.348	1.338	0.932
I don't deal with online shopping, I prefer buying from real stores	3.654	1.189	
I have never dealt with an online store that wasn't trying to rip me off	3.879	1.299	
I am willing to return the product if I found a difference between the real price and the announced price	4.153	.804	
Customer Loyalty and Relationship	3.902	.870	
I think most of digital marketers are scammers, I don't recommend them to anyone	3.172	1.550	
Digital marketing is what I call easy money in marketing	4.302	.856	
I always spread the word when I am scammed by an online marketer	3.981	1.261	
All online advertisements are a scam	3.462	1.204	
Word of mouth is important if I decided to buy anything online	4.323	.827	0.88
I don't recall a famous brand scamming its customers in prices	4.353	.819	
Hidden fees and deceptive prices are the specialty of unknown vague business seeking money	4.503	.865	
Business Reputation	4.014	.828	

Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses were tested using one-sample test. The main hypothesis of study which argued “**Ethics of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers’ attitudes towards the organization**” came with results that t-value of 30.727 was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That meant the hypothesis was accepted and ethics of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers’ attitudes towards the organization.

Table 6. Main Hypothesis one-sample Test

One-Sample Statistics						
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
total	431	4.0431	.70476	.03395		

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 3						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
total	30.727	430	.000	1.04310	.9764	1.1098

One-sample test was also used in order to check the acceptance or rejection of sub-hypotheses, results of one-sample test indicated that following which was highlighted in table below:

First hypothesis testing indicated that t-value of 45.90 was statistically significant at the 0.05 level which meant that the hypothesis was accepted and psychological effect of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization.

For the second hypothesis, t-value of 54.57 was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That means Consumer awareness of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization.

Third hypothesis indicated that t-value of 15.103 was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That meant trust and credibility of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization.

As for the fourth hypothesis, t-value of 29.376 is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That meant purchase decision making of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization.

Fifth hypothesis indicated that t-value of 21.54 was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That meant customer loyalty and relationship of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

The sixth and final hypothesis indicated that t-value of 25.40 was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That meant business reputation of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

Table 7. Sub-Hypotheses One-Sample Test

One-Sample Statistics						
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Psychological Effect	431	4.2448	.56301	.02712		

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 3						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Psychological Effect	45.900	430	.000	1.24478	1.1915	1.2981

H1: Psychological effect of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

One-Sample Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Customer Awareness	431	4.3348	.50780	.02446

One-Sample Test				
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Test Value = 3						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Customer Awareness	54.570	430	.000	1.33477	1.2867	1.3828

H2: Consumer awareness of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

One-Sample Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Trust and credibility	431	3.7783	1.06983	.05153

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 3						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Trust and credibility	15.103	430	.000	.77829	.6770	.8796

H3: trust and credibility of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

One-Sample Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Purchase decision making	431	4.0719	.75755	.03649

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 3						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Purchase decision making	29.376	430	.000	1.07193	1.0002	1.1436

H4: purchase decision making of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

One-Sample Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Customer Loyalty and Relationship	431	3.9023	.86965	.04189

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 3						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper

Customer Loyalty and Relationship	21.540	430	.000	.90229	.8200	.9846
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H5: customer loyalty and relationship of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Business Reputation	431	4.0136	.82845	.03991

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 3

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Business Reputation	25.400	430	.000	1.01359	.9352	1.0920

H6: business reputation of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization

V. DISCUSSION

Current study hypothesized that ethics of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization in terms of (psychological effect, consumer awareness, trust and credibility, purchase decision making, customer loyalty and relationship, business reputation). Depending on quantitative methodology and utilizing a questionnaire, primary data was collected from (431) consumer as a convenient sample. Collected data were treated and managed through SPSS, and results accepted the study's main hypothesis indicating that

Results of analysis indicated that hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing has a negative influence on customers' attitudes towards the organization. Regarding sub-hypotheses, it was seen that all sub-variables were influence by the idea of hidden fees and prices with consumer awareness being the highest in being influence scoring t-value of 54.57. study indicated that one of the notable consequences of hidden fees and prices in digital marketing is a decrease in the consumers' level of awareness. In situations where such hidden costs are not well articulated to the customers initially, this creates a skewed perception of the true value of the item or the service in relation to their ability to afford it. Consequently, when they consider the offering in the first place, they might be led to believe that they stand a better chance of paying less than they actually will, only to quickly be met with other hidden charges that are never a good sight for sore eyes. These factors minimize consumer awareness, and thus, they will have less confidence in the organization. This agreed with Biswas et al. (2023) who stated that the consumers could feel cheated or even deceived, and therefore are left with no option but to doubt the authenticity of the business. Therefore, this could lead to a ripple effect in terms of the overall awareness within the consumer society since clients are more likely to be guarded when entering into a transaction.

In the second rank there appeared that there is a psychological effect of hidden fees and prices in digital marketing and it scored a t-value of 45.90. As established by this research, the psychological impact of concealed charges and manipulation of prices in the digital marketing process significantly affects the attitude that customers have towards the organization. Anytime customer is faced with extra charges or was made to believe that he has to pay for a service or good that was not bargained for, he feels let down and this makes him develop negative feelings such as anger, disappointment, and betrayal. These psychological reactions are also influential in shaping their perception of that organization in general. Customers can be deceived into developing distrust and skepticism where they doubt the genuineness as well as the reliability of the business. The above mentioned negative attitudes towards the organization can result in low levels of customers' satisfaction, customer loyalty and their willingness to conduct future business with the organization. Agreeing with Visser et al. (2021) who argued that the negative psychological consequences of hidden fees and deceptive prices in digital marketing further underlines the values of trust, integrity, and ethical approach to produce a desired customer attitude and valued brand image to hold ground in the cut-throat competitive world.

The least influenced aspect of the chosen sub-variables in the study appeared to be trust and credibility which came out with a t-value of 15.103. It was concluded through analysis that hidden fees and deceptive prices, despite the fact that they are used in the framework of the digital marketing concept, have a negative impact on the organizational attitude of customers. Whenever clients find that they have been charged extra cash or when they realize that the advertised prices are not actual prices, then the trust that they once placed in the organization has been violated. Hypothesis 4 proposed that attitudes and perceptions are affected when trust is violated, and this translates to the customer-business relationship since trust is considered a core component of these relationships. Such results agreed with Deshmukh and Patil (2021) who noted that customers may even experience their feelings of being duped or being used and even feeling frustrated, angry and betrayed among others. What this does is that their attitudes towards the organization change and they can become more skeptical, wary or even detached. When trust is compromised, this can result in lasting effects on loyalty, word-of-mouth promotion, and the overall commercial image of a company.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The act of being deceptive, and concealing price and fee information through digital marketing is very detrimental to the welfare of both parties involved. It erodes the basic values of the free-market economy such as openness, truth-telling, and reciprocity in business relations. The strategic misrepresentation of information undermines customer trust, and the following are some of the adverse effects: Firstly, it affects the overall customer experience as they are frustrated having spent their time and money being tricked into buying products, they didn't want in the first place. This can create dissatisfaction and frustration and worst still lead to a negative attitude towards the brand. Secondly, it discourages customer loyalty and professionalism since customers are in doubt about the reputability of the business. Loyalty can never be built when there is no trust and this is defied when businesses engage in deceptive activities that are unlawful and leaves customers with no option but to look for another business partner. Besides, they found that categories that specific consumers do not understand also losing sales and missing opportunities because prices and fees are hidden. When faced with unexpected costs, customers may leave their cart and move to another store, look for another product or complain to their followers or friends, and the worst they write it on social media. Most negative comments which are in form of word-of-mouth communication and online reviews can go viral in the social media thus harming the image of the company and its future revenues. In conclusion, the practice of being deceitful and concealing prices and fees in digital marketing is not only wrong but also detrimental to the customers and businesses alike, brand reputation and profit margins.

Study recommended running a digital marketing strategy that is based on transparency and continuous disclosure for the benefit of organizational reputation. In addition, and to ensure that the customers have a positive attitude towards their brand, there is the need to ensure that the businesses adopt the best ethical practices that favor the relationship between the business and their customers. To enhance the customer attitudes, it is essential for organizations to practice transparency, fairness, and ethical operations within their online advertising communication by avoiding misleading or concealing the actual cost information to the consumers.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Current study was based on practical and theoretical implications. From a practical perspective the study can serve as an eye-opener to businesses where they can learn the need to embrace honest practices on the prices and charges involved in digital marketing. By pointing out deceptive prices and hidden fees as a disadvantage for all those involved in a transaction, the study can serve as an input to organizations to practice cost transparency and, therefore, increase consumer trust.

As for the theoretical implication, the study gives insight on the unethical nature that some digital marketing undertakings have towards consumers concerning costs and fees. Toward this end, the analyses of these practices' ethical implications can enrich the theoretical discourse regarding acceptable or appropriate behaviors of business entities within the digital economy by underlining the legitimate and ethically sustainable ways of setting prices worthy of consumers' trust.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Current study was limited to perspectives and opinions of customers. There was no examining for a certain organizations or sector within a specific country. In addition to that, there was no involvement of financial statement, reports or documents of certain sector in carrying out the study.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is suggested to carry out a research that examines the impact of differences between advertisement and reality of product within digital marketing.

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