A STUDY ON DIGITAL LURKING: INVISIBLE CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF SDGS

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Abstract

The growth of social media platforms has gradually changed the manner in which consumers interact with digital content. Although digital marketing analysis generally emphasizes visible indicators such as likes, comments, and shares, a significant number of users engage with content in a silent manner. These users regularly view posts, videos, and advertisements without expressing their reactions publicly. This behaviour is commonly described as digital lurking.

This paper aims to provide a conceptual understanding of digital lurking and to explain its relevance in studying invisible consumer engagement on social media platforms. The study follows a descriptive approach and is based on secondary data collected from textbooks, academic articles, and freely accessible online sources. In the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), social media is increasingly used to promote awareness related to health, education, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. The paper discusses the characteristics of digital lurking, reasons behind silent engagement, and its relevance in evaluating SDG-oriented digital marketing campaigns. The study concludes that digital lurking represents a meaningful yet often overlooked form of consumer engagement in social media–based sustainability communication.

Keywords: Digital Lurking, Invisible Consumer Engagement, Social Media Marketing, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Online Consumer Behaviour.

Introduction

Social media has become one of the most widely used channels for interaction between businesses and consumers. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn are actively used by organizations to promote products, communicate brand values, and reach large audiences. In most cases, digital marketers assess the success of their campaigns using measurable indicators such as likes, comments, shares, and follower counts.

However, these indicators do not always reflect the actual level of consumer involvement. Many users regularly watch videos, read posts, and follow brand updates without reacting publicly. With the increasing popularity of stories, reels, and short-form video content, passive viewing has become more common in recent years.

In addition, factors such as privacy concerns, fear of judgement, and social pressure influence how individuals behave online. As a result, many consumers prefer observing content rather than actively participating in discussions. This has created a noticeable gap between visible engagement metrics and the real influence of digital marketing communication.

Digital lurking refers to this pattern of silent content consumption where users do not leave observable signs of interaction. Even though such users remain invisible in engagement statistics, they actively process information and develop opinions. In the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), social media platforms are widely used by governments, non-governmental organizations, and social enterprises to create awareness and encourage positive behavioral change. Understanding how audiences engage with SDGrelated content, including silent forms of engagement, is essential for evaluating the true reach and impact of digital campaigns aimed at sustainability and social development. Therefore, digital lurking becomes an important concept in analyzing social mediabased SDG communication.

Objectives of the Study
The objectives of the study are:
◆ To understand the concept of digital lurking in social media environments.
◆ To examine the nature of invisible consumer engagement.
◆ To identify factors that influence silent content consumption.
◆ To study the implications of digital lurking for marketers.
◆ To examine the relevance of digital lurking in evaluating social media campaigns related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Scope of the Study
The present study is limited to understanding digital lurking and invisible consumer engagement within social media platforms. The study is conceptual in nature and is based on secondary data. It does not involve primary data collection or geographical limitation. The scope of the study is confined to analyzing the relevance of digital lurking in digital marketing evaluation, with specific reference to SDG-oriented communication on social media.

Review of Literature
Researchers have long studied consumer engagement in digital marketing, with early studies focusing mainly on observable interactions. **Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019)** explain that digital engagement includes both active participation and passive content consumption. They suggest that many consumers prefer observing content before taking any action, especially in online environments.

Bhatia (2019) notes that online users often avoid public interaction due to privacy concerns and fear of judgement. According to him, silent consumption still contributes to brand recognition and perception, even though it is not reflected through traditional engagement measures.

Charlesworth (2014) explains that digital platforms are frequently used as information sources rather than spaces for interaction. Consumers rely on digital content to evaluate products and services without necessarily participating in discussions.

Martinek (2022), through her work on digital practices tracing, highlights that lurking is a meaningful form of participation in digital environments. She explains that consumers who lurk are actively involved in observing and interpreting content, even though they do not express visible engagement.

Gupta (2022) emphasizes that relying only on likes and comments may lead to incomplete evaluation of marketing effectiveness.

Kingsnorth (2022) also argues that long-term influence and trust building depend on content exposure, including passive consumption.

Nielsen (2018) reports that a large proportion of digital media users prefer consuming online content without engaging publicly. The report highlights that users frequently observe advertisements, branded content, and videos without interacting through likes or comments. **HubSpot (2020)** social media engagement should not be evaluated solely based on visible interactions. The report emphasizes that metrics such as reach, impressions, and content views provide valuable insights into audience interest. These studies indicate a lack of focused research on digital lurking as a distinct concept, which this study attempts to address. Based on the reviewed literature, it is evident that while consumer engagement has been widely discussed, limited attention has been given to silent or invisible forms of participation. To support the theoretical discussion, the following section presents illustrative examples from social media platforms that reflect digital lurking behaviour in real-world digital marketing and SDG communication contexts.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a conceptual and descriptive research design. It is based entirely on secondary data collected from standard textbooks, research papers, and openly available online sources related to digital marketing and consumer behaviour. Since the study focuses on theoretical understanding, no primary data collection was undertaken. The analysis is based on interpretation and synthesis of existing literature.

Concept of Digital Lurking

Digital lurking can be defined as the behaviour of users who consume online content without participating in visible forms of interaction. These users regularly watch videos, read posts, and follow updates while choosing to remain silent. Factors such as privacy, social anxiety, and lack of interest in public expression contribute to this behaviour. Digital lurking should not be considered inactivity, as lurkers are cognitively engaged with content.

Illustrative Examples from Social Media Platforms

To better understand the practical relevance of digital lurking, the present study includes brief exam from popular social media platforms. These examples illustrate how consumers often engage with digital content silently while still being influenced by marketing communication. The examples help connect the theoretical discussion of digital lurking with real-world digital marketing practices.

i. Instagram Stories and Silent Consumer Engagement

Instagram Stories have emerged as one of the most widely consumed content formats on social media platforms. Unlike regular posts, Instagram Stories allow users to view content without leaving any visible interaction such as likes or comments. This feature encourages passive content consumption and supports the phenomenon of digital lurking.

A study reported by Forbes based on research conducted by Delmondo and Instagram analysed more than 15,000 stories from over 200 leading global brands. The study found that Instagram Stories achieved high reach and completion rates, even when visible engagement levels were relatively low. Many users watched stories fully without responding publicly, indicating a strong presence of silent consumption.

Brands such as Oreo and L'Oréal Paris used Instagram Stories as part of their digital marketing strategy and experienced increased brand recall and improved campaign performance. Despite limited visible engagement, these brands observed positive outcomes such as higher ad recall and website visits. This demonstrates that users who silently view content are influenced by digital marketing messages.

This case clearly reflects digital lurking behaviour, where consumers remain invisible in engagement metrics but actively consume and respond internally to brand communication.
Source:(Erskine, 2018)

ii. YouTube Silent Viewing and Consumer Influence

YouTube is another platform where digital lurking behaviour is highly evident. A majority of YouTube users watch videos without liking, commenting, or subscribing to channels. Viewing remains the most common form of interaction on the platform.

A research study published in the journal Computers in Human Behavior examined user engagement patterns on YouTube and found that passive viewing was the dominant mode of interaction. The study concluded that users primarily consume videos for information and entertainment, while active engagement such as commenting is influenced by social motivation rather than content interest (Khan).

Product review videos, educational tutorials, and brand advertisements often receive millions of views but comparatively fewer comments. This shows that a large number of consumers watch content silently while still being influenced by the information presented. Many consumers make purchase decisions after watching such videos, even though they do not express engagement publicly. This case highlights that digital lurking is not limited to one platform but is a common behaviour across digital environments, playing a significant role in shaping consumer attitudes and decisions.
Source: (Khan, 2017)

These examples demonstrate that digital lurking is a widespread and meaningful form of consumer engagement across social media platforms. Although lurkers do not participate visibly, their continuous content consumption influences brand awareness, perception, and decision-making. This supports the argument that invisible engagement should be recognized as an important component of digital marketing analysis.

Analysis

In conceptual research, analysis is primarily carried out through explanation and interpretation rather than numerical measurement. Digital lurking reflects a form of cognitive engagement in which users actively observe and evaluate content without expressing visible reactions. Lurkers may compare information, remember brand messages, and consider alternatives while remaining silent on digital platforms.

The analysis indicates that digital lurking is widely present across social media platforms and represents a large but hidden audience segment. Since traditional engagement metrics focus only on visible responses, the influence of this silent group often remains unmeasured. This highlights the limitation of relying solely on likes, comments, and shares to assess consumer engagement.

Interpretation

The interpretation of digital lurking suggests that invisible engagement plays an important role in shaping consumer attitudes and decision-making. Silent users frequently rely on digital content for information search and evaluation before making purchase decisions. Although they do not interact publicly, their repeated exposure to content contributes to brand awareness and familiarity.

Digital lurking also allows users to avoid social exposure while still benefiting from online information. This indicates that invisible engagement should be considered a meaningful and valid form of consumer behaviour within digital environments.

Implications of Digital Lurking for SDG-Oriented Digital Campaigns

Social media platforms are increasingly used to promote awareness related to Sustainable Development Goals such as health, education, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. Many users consume SDG-related content silently without engaging publicly. Digital lurking therefore plays a crucial role in spreading awareness even when visible engagement metrics appear low. Recognizing invisible engagement helps organizations better assess the effectiveness of SDG-focused digital marketing campaigns and design inclusive communication strategies that reach silent audiences.

Findings of the Study

The conceptual analysis leads to the following findings:
- Digital lurking is a common behaviour on social media platforms.
- Invisible engagement influences consumer perception and decisions.
- Visible metrics do not fully reflect marketing impact.
- Silent audiences play a role in brand awareness.
- Digital lurking is relevant in evaluating SDG-oriented social media campaigns.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by its conceptual nature and reliance on secondary data. The absence of primary data restricts empirical validation of the findings. Future research may include surveys or experimental studies to measure the impact of digital lurking on consumer behaviour.

Conclusion

Digital lurking highlights an important aspect of online consumer behaviour that is often overlooked in digital marketing analysis. While lurkers do not express visible engagement, they actively consume and interpret digital content. Their behaviour influences awareness, perception, and decision-making in subtle ways.

Recognising invisible engagement helps researchers and marketers gain a more realistic understanding of how digital content affects consumers. From an SDG perspective, acknowledging digital lurking helps organizations better assess the reach and influence of social media campaigns aimed at sustainable development and social change.

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