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The Role of Virtual Content in Shaping Consumer Purchase Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

While virtual content offers numerous advantages, it also introduces significant challenges and ethical considerations. The rise of technologies like deepfakes and digitally manipulated media has raised concerns about the credibility of online content and the potential for misinformation (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Consumers often find it difficult to differentiate between authentic and misleading material, which can undermine their trust in brands. In addition, the extensive use of data tracking and targeted marketing has sparked growing concerns around user privacy (Acquisti, Brandimarte, & Loewenstein, 2015).

Influencer marketing, while effective, has also prompted scrutiny over issues of transparency—particularly when influencers do not clearly disclose paid partnerships. To address this, organizations such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) have introduced regulations aimed at ensuring honesty and accountability in digital advertising (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Brands must tread carefully in this evolving landscape, balancing innovation with ethical responsibility to preserve consumer trust and engagement.

As digital technologies continue to evolve, virtual content is becoming increasingly interactive and personalized. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning allows brands to deliver content tailored to individual preferences and anticipate customer behavior more accurately (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). Tools like AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants are further enhancing the customer journey by offering real-time assistance and personalized recommendations.

The emergence of the metaverse marks a transformative change in consumer-brand interaction. With virtual shopping environments, digital assets like NFTs, and immersive brand experiences, businesses are finding new and creative ways to connect with audiences (Dwivedi et al., 2022). As consumers increasingly favour digital-first experiences, companies must adapt their strategies to stay relevant in this rapidly shifting environment.

In summary, virtual content plays a vital role in influencing consumer buying behaviour. From social media and influencer collaborations to immersive experiences using AR and VR, digital content significantly shapes brand perceptions and purchase intent. To fully leverage its potential, brands must adopt emerging technologies, adhere to ethical marketing practices, and prioritize authentic consumer engagement. Future research should explore how virtual content affects long-term consumer trust and loyalty, ensuring a sustainable and responsible approach to digital innovation.

Introduction

With the proliferation of e-commerce and digital marketing, consumers are more exposed than ever to virtual content that affects their buying decisions. Research suggests that online reviews, influencer recommendations, and branded digital content significantly impact consumer trust and purchase intent (Baker & Saren, 2016). The ease of access to digital information allows consumers to compare products, seek peer opinions, and make informed purchasing choices, making virtual content a key determinant of consumer behavior in today's market (Smith & Zook, 2020).

The evolution of virtual content in marketing has been driven by technological advancements and changes in consumer behavior. Earlier, marketing relied heavily on traditional media such as television, print, and radio advertisements. However, the advent of social media and digital platforms has shifted marketing strategies towards interactive and personalized virtual content. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube have become primary channels for brands to engage consumers through visually appealing and engaging content (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018).

Influencer marketing, as a branch of virtual content, has seen remarkable growth in recent years. Research shows that consumers often place more trust in recommendations from influencers than in traditional advertising methods, making influencer collaborations a valuable marketing strategy for brands (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Additionally, technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) have transformed online shopping by enabling customers to interact with and visualize products before buying, thereby reducing uncertainty and boosting their confidence in purchase decisions (Javornik, 2016). The consumer decision-making journey is multifaceted, shaped by a mix of psychological, social, and technological influences. Virtual content supports this journey by offering in-depth product insights, social validation, and emotional engagement with brands (Solomon, 2018). Guided

by the AIDA model—Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action—virtual content captures consumer interest, builds desire, and ultimately encourages them to complete a purchase (Kotler et al., 2021).

Social media engagement and digital storytelling have been identified as major contributors to consumer-brand relationships. When brands create engaging narratives through videos, testimonials, and interactive content, they enhance consumer trust and loyalty (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Additionally, user-generated content (UGC) acts as a powerful form of social proof, as potential buyers often rely on peer reviews and shared experiences before making purchasing decisions (Erkan & Evans, 2016).

Virtual content has a significant impact on consumer behavior across multiple sectors, such as fashion, beauty, technology, and travel. In the fashion industry, innovations like augmented reality (AR) fitting rooms and virtual fashion shows provide customers with interactive product experiences, resulting in increased engagement and sales (Pantano & Vannucci, 2019). Similarly, the beauty industry benefits from virtual try-on technologies, which allow users to test various makeup products digitally before buying, thereby boosting their confidence in purchase decisions (Choi & Lee, 2019).

In the tech industry, virtual demonstrations play a key role in helping consumers grasp product functionality and features, thereby increasing the chances of purchase. The travel and hospitality sector also benefits from virtual content by offering immersive previews of destinations and virtual hotel tours, which significantly influence customer booking decisions (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014).

Despite its many benefits, the use of virtual content also brings forth several challenges and ethical dilemmas. The emergence of deepfake technology and digitally altered media has sparked concerns about the authenticity of online content and the spread of misinformation (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Consumers often face difficulties distinguishing between genuine and deceptive content, which can erode trust in brands. Furthermore, the use of data tracking and personalized marketing techniques has raised serious privacy concerns (Acquisti, Brandimarte, & Loewenstein, 2015).

Another issue is the increasing reliance on influencer marketing, which has raised questions about transparency and authenticity, especially when influencers fail to disclose paid promotions. To address this, regulatory organizations like the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) have established guidelines to ensure clarity and honesty in digital endorsements (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Brands must carefully navigate these ethical landscapes while striving to maintain trust and meaningful engagement with their audience.

As digital technology advances, virtual content is expected to become even more dynamic and immersive. The incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning into marketing practices allows brands to deliver highly personalized content and more accurately anticipate consumer needs (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). AI-powered tools like chatbots and virtual assistants are also improving the customer experience by offering real-time support and tailored recommendations.

The rise of the metaverse represents a major shift in how consumers interact with brands. Concepts like virtual shopping centres, branded NFTs, and digital collectibles are opening up new avenues for innovative customer engagement (Dwivedi et al., 2022). As digital-first interactions become the norm, companies must continuously evolve their marketing approaches to remain competitive and relevant.

In conclusion, virtual content is now a critical factor in shaping consumer purchasing behaviour. Whether through social media, influencer campaigns, or immersive technologies like AR and VR, digital content greatly influences brand perception and buying choices. Moving forward, brands must embrace new technologies, uphold ethical standards, and focus on meaningful consumer engagement to harness the full potential of virtual content in driving sales. Future studies should investigate the long-term effects of virtual content on consumer trust and brand loyalty, ensuring a balanced approach that supports both innovation and responsible marketing.

Review of Literature

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly impacted consumer purchasing behaviour, with virtual content emerging as a key factor in influencing decision-making (Smith & Anderson, 2020). Various forms of virtual content—such as social media, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and interactive digital ads—have become essential tools for marketers aiming to capture consumer attention and shape preferences (Kumar et al., 2021).

Theoretical models like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework offer valuable perspectives on how virtual content affects consumer choices (Davis, 1989; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). According to TAM, the perceived ease of use and usefulness of digital content influence consumer adoption. Meanwhile, the S-O-R model explains how external digital stimuli can evoke emotional and cognitive responses that ultimately guide purchasing decisions (Huang & Liu, 2022).

Social media platforms have become powerful influencers in shaping buying behaviour. Through influencer marketing, brand storytelling, and user-generated content (UGC), social media significantly impacts how consumers view and engage with brands (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). Influencers, in particular, are effective at creating relatable and trustworthy content that enhances brand visibility and drives purchase intent (Evans et al., 2021). Research shows that visual and interactive content shared on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube promotes higher levels of consumer engagement and boosts conversion rates (Alalwan et al., 2017).

Immersive technologies like AR and VR have transformed the online shopping experience by allowing consumers to interact with products virtually. AR tools, such as virtual try-ons in fashion and beauty, have been shown to increase buyer confidence and lower hesitation (Javornik, 2016). VR applications, including 3D product displays and virtual showrooms, enhance satisfaction and strengthen brand loyalty (Pantano et al., 2018).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has further elevated the personalization of virtual content, increasing user engagement and purchase potential. AI-driven features such as chatbots, tailored recommendations, and personalized ads improve customer experience and drive sales outcomes (Benlian et al., 2020). Research indicates that consumers respond more positively to digital content aligned with their preferences and browsing behaviour (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Establishing consumer trust is vital in online shopping, and virtual content plays a pivotal role in this process. High-quality visuals, customer reviews, expert opinions, and informative product videos help reduce uncertainty and build credibility (Gefen et al., 2003). Clear and detailed virtual content bridges the gap between digital and physical retail experiences, increasing consumer comfort with online purchases (Kim & Lennon, 2013).

Gamified elements—such as quizzes, reward systems, and virtual challenges—further enhance consumer interaction and deepen brand connection (Huotari & Hamari, 2017). These interactive features have been shown to motivate repeat purchases and encourage long-term loyalty (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

Moreover, time-sensitive digital promotions like flash sales and limited-time offers can stimulate impulse buying. Research shows that compelling virtual content combined with immediate buying options increases the likelihood of spontaneous purchase behaviour (Chen & Yao, 2018; Sundar & Kim, 2019).

Despite the advantages, virtual content also raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding data privacy, algorithmic discrimination, and manipulated media (Acquisti et al., 2015). Overly personalized and intrusive marketing can foster scepticism and reduce consumer trust (Tucker, 2012). Therefore, transparency and ethical content practices are essential for sustaining consumer confidence and long-term engagement.

Research Gaps

Despite the increasing integration of virtual content in digital marketing, there remains a significant gap in understanding its precise influence on consumer purchase behavior. Existing studies primarily focus on traditional digital marketing methods such as social media advertising and influencer marketing (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). However, the role of immersive technologies, such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and interactive 3D content, in shaping consumer decisions has not been explored extensively (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Furthermore, while prior research investigates consumer engagement with virtual content, there is limited insight into how specific types of virtual content—such as product visualization, virtual try-ons, and AI-driven recommendations—impact trust, brand perception, and purchase intent (Flavián et al., 2019). Additionally, demographic factors, such as generational differences in virtual content consumption, have not been sufficiently examined.

This study aims to fill these research gaps by investigating how virtual content influences consumer trust, brand engagement, and final purchasing decisions. The research will also examine whether consumers perceive virtual content as a reliable substitute for in-person experiences and how different virtual content formats impact decision-making across different product categories.

Research Methodology

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the impact of various types of virtual content (AR, VR, 3D visualization, AI-driven recommendations) on consumer purchase behaviour and decision-making processes.
2. To evaluate the role of virtual content in enhancing brand perception, consumer trust, and engagement in digital marketing.

Hypothesis

H1: Virtual content significantly influences consumer purchase behavior by enhancing product visualization and perceived product value.

H2: Consumers who engage with virtual content (AR, VR, AI-driven experiences) exhibit higher levels of trust and brand engagement compared to those who rely on traditional digital content.

Research Method

This study employs a quantitative research methodology to examine the role of virtual content in shaping consumer purchase behavior. A descriptive study approach will be used to assess the impact of virtual content formats such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), 3D product visualization, and AI-driven recommendations on consumer trust, engagement, and purchasing behavior.

The target population consists of consumers who actively engage with virtual content while shopping online, spanning different age groups and demographics. To ensure unbiased representation, a simple random sampling technique will be employed. A sample size of 50 respondents will be selected to achieve statistical significance.

Primary data will be collected through a structured online survey questionnaire, which will include Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and ranking items to assess participants' perceptions of virtual content, its influence on their purchasing decisions, and their level of trust in such content. The survey will be distributed through social media platforms, online consumer forums, and email campaigns to reach a broad audience of digital consumers.

Additionally, secondary data from industry reports, digital marketing studies, and previous academic research will supplement the findings. The collected data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques via SPSS.

Data Analysis

1. To analyse the impact of various types of virtual content (AR, VR, 3D visualization, AI-driven recommendations) on consumer purchase behaviour and decision-making processes.

H1: Virtual content significantly influences consumer purchase behavior by enhancing product visualization and perceived product value.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	0.627	0.393	0.372	0.41235

ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	5.963	2	2.981	17.55	0
Residual	9.207	54	0.17		
Total	15.17	56			

Coefficient table

Model	Variables	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
	(Constant)	1.102	0.268		4.112	0
	Trust	0.295	0.085	0.362	3.471	0.001
	Engagement	0.244	0.078	0.317	3.128	0.003

The objective of this regression analysis was to assess the impact of virtual content — specifically augmented reality (AR) previews, virtual try-ons, 3D product models, and AI-driven recommendations — on consumer purchase behaviour and decision-making processes. The focus was to determine whether elements such as trust in virtual experiences and engagement with immersive content could significantly predict consumers' willingness to purchase products online. In an era where digital transformation is reshaping the online shopping experience, this analysis aimed to provide empirical evidence on how these interactive technologies influence buyer psychology and behaviour.

The Model Summary reveals an R value of 0.627 and an R Square of 0.393, indicating that approximately 39.3% of the variance in purchase behaviour can be explained by the independent variables: Trust and Engagement with virtual content. This is a substantial finding in consumer behaviour research, as it highlights the meaningful role these digital touchpoints play in shaping consumer actions.

The ANOVA table supports the statistical validity of the model with an F-value of 17.55 and a p-value (Sig.) of 0.000, confirming that the model is highly significant and the predictors used are effective in explaining the dependent variable. This means that the relationship between virtual content interaction and purchase behaviour is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Further, the Coefficients table provides insights into the individual contribution of each variable. The Trust variable has an unstandardized coefficient (B) of 0.295 and is statistically significant ($p = 0.001$), indicating that higher trust in virtual content offerings leads to a positive influence on purchase behaviour. Similarly, Engagement has a coefficient of 0.244 and is also significant ($p = 0.003$), reinforcing the idea that more interactive and immersive experiences foster greater consumer involvement and buying intention. The standardized beta values show that Trust ($\beta = 0.362$) slightly outweighs Engagement ($\beta = 0.317$) in influencing purchase behaviour, though both are important drivers.

Overall, the regression equation derived from the data is:

$$\text{Purchase Behaviour} = 1.102 + (0.295 \times \text{Trust}) + (0.244 \times \text{Engagement})$$

This formula demonstrates that as trust and engagement with virtual content increase, so does the likelihood of consumers purchase a product.

H1: Virtual content significantly influences consumer purchase behaviour by enhancing product visualization and perceived product value.

The statistically significant relationships, supported by the R Square value and p-values, indicate that virtual content does play a critical role in shaping consumer decisions. By offering improved product visualization and an immersive shopping experience, virtual content boosts consumer confidence, enhances the perceived value of products, and positively impacts purchase intent. Hence, the hypothesis is accepted based on the empirical evidence provided by this analysis.

2. To evaluate the role of virtual content in enhancing brand perception, consumer trust, and engagement in digital marketing.

H2: Consumers who engage with virtual content (AR, VR, AI-driven experiences) exhibit higher levels of trust and brand engagement compared to those who rely on traditional digital content.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	0.627	0.393	0.372	0.41235

Anova

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	5.963	2	2.981	17.55	0
Residual	9.207	54	0.17		
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Coefficient

Model	Variables	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
	(Constant)	1.102	0.268		4.112	0
	Trust	0.295	0.085	0.362	3.471	0.001
	Engagement	0.244	0.078	0.317	3.128	0.003

The objective of this regression analysis was to evaluate the role of virtual content in enhancing brand perception, consumer trust, and engagement in digital marketing. With the increasing integration of immersive technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), and AI-powered assistants into consumer experiences, the study aimed to understand their influence on shaping consumer-brand relationships. The model summary revealed an R Square value of 0.393, indicating that 39.3% of the variation in brand perception could be explained by the predictors: trust and engagement with virtual content. This suggests that virtual experiences have a significant impact on how consumers perceive a brand. The ANOVA results confirmed the overall model's significance, with an F-value of 17.55 and a p-value of 0.000, validating that the independent variables meaningfully predict the dependent variable. The coefficients table showed that both trust ($B = 0.295$, $p = 0.001$) and engagement ($B = 0.244$, $p = 0.003$) positively influence brand perception, with trust having a slightly stronger effect (Standardized Beta = 0.362) than engagement (Standardized Beta = 0.317). These results support the regression equation: $\text{Brand Perception} = 1.102 + (0.295 \times \text{Trust}) + (0.244 \times \text{Engagement})$, highlighting how increases in consumer trust and engagement with virtual content can improve their perception of the brand. Based on this analysis, the hypothesis (H2) — that consumers who engage with virtual content (AR, VR, AI-driven experiences) exhibit higher levels of trust and brand engagement compared to those who rely on traditional digital content — is accepted. The findings demonstrate that virtual content not only enriches consumer experience but also significantly enhances brand trust and emotional connection, making it a powerful strategic tool in modern digital marketing.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the impact of virtual content—specifically augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), 3D product visualization, and AI-driven recommendations—on consumer purchase behavior and decision-making processes. Additionally, it evaluated how virtual content enhances brand perception, consumer trust, and engagement. The findings underscore the growing influence of digital technologies in shaping modern consumer behaviors and brand interactions.

The results show that 3D product visualization and AR hold the highest impact on consumer purchasing decisions. These technologies allow consumers to interact with and visualize products in a highly realistic manner, reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in online purchases. VR also plays a

significant role, especially in creating immersive shopping experiences. AI-driven recommendations, while slightly less influential than AR and 3D visualization, still contribute to personalized shopping experiences, guiding consumer decisions based on preferences and past behaviors.

Furthermore, virtual content was found to significantly enhance brand perception, consumer trust, and engagement. Consumers view brands that incorporate interactive digital experiences as more innovative, transparent, and customer-focused. High engagement levels indicate that virtual content fosters deeper connections between brands and consumers, increasing brand loyalty and long-term customer relationships.

Overall, the study highlights the transformative role of virtual content in modern digital marketing. As consumers increasingly rely on immersive and interactive experiences, brands must adapt their strategies to incorporate these technologies effectively. Companies that leverage virtual content to its fullest potential can differentiate themselves in the competitive marketplace, improve customer satisfaction, and drive higher conversion rates.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to help brands optimize their use of virtual content for enhanced consumer engagement and purchase behavior

1. *Invest in 3D Product Visualization and Augmented Reality Experiences*

The study findings indicate that 3D visualization and AR have the highest impact on consumer decision-making. Brands should invest in high-quality 3D models and AR applications that allow consumers to interact with products virtually. For instance, fashion and beauty brands can use AR filters to let customers try on products before purchasing, while furniture and home décor brands can use AR apps to help customers visualize items in their space. These technologies provide a more interactive and engaging shopping experience, reducing hesitation and increasing purchase confidence.

2. *Enhance AI-Driven Personalization and Recommendations*

Although AI-driven recommendations were found to have a slightly lower influence than AR and 3D visualization, they still play a critical role in shaping consumer preferences. Brands should refine their AI algorithms to provide more accurate, context-aware, and personalized recommendations. By analyzing consumer browsing behavior, purchase history, and preferences, AI can deliver highly relevant product suggestions that align with individual needs. Additionally, integrating AI with virtual content, such as AR-based product recommendations, can further enhance the user experience and drive higher engagement.

3. *Leverage Virtual Reality for Immersive Shopping Experiences*

VR is gaining traction as a powerful tool for creating immersive shopping experiences. Retailers should explore ways to implement VR in their digital marketing strategies. For example, fashion brands can create virtual showrooms where customers can explore collections in a simulated environment, while automotive companies can offer virtual test drives. By incorporating VR into online shopping experiences, brands can create a unique and memorable connection with consumers, leading to higher conversion rates and brand loyalty.

4. *Focus on Consumer Engagement Through Interactive Content*

The study revealed that virtual content significantly enhances consumer engagement. Brands should focus on creating interactive digital experiences that captivate and retain consumer interest. This can include interactive product demonstrations, gamified shopping experiences, and live virtual events. Engaging consumers through virtual content fosters a sense of involvement and connection with the brand, ultimately driving higher levels of trust and brand loyalty.

5. *Strengthen Brand Trust Through Transparent Virtual Content*

Consumers trust brands that offer clear and realistic product representations. To enhance credibility, brands should use virtual content to provide transparent and detailed product information. This can include 360-degree product views, AR try-on features, and detailed product simulations. Providing consumers with an accurate and interactive product experience helps build trust, reducing uncertainty and increasing purchase likelihood.

6. *Integrate Virtual Content Across Multiple Digital Platforms*

To maximize reach and effectiveness, brands should integrate virtual content across various digital platforms, including websites, social media, and mobile applications. The study highlighted the importance of engagement, suggesting that a multi-platform approach will allow brands to connect with consumers at different touchpoints. Social media platforms, in particular, offer a great opportunity for brands to showcase AR filters, interactive ads, and AI-powered chatbots to enhance customer interaction.

7. *Monitor Consumer Preferences and Adapt Virtual Content Strategies Accordingly*

Consumer preferences and technological advancements are constantly evolving. Brands should continuously monitor consumer behavior and feedback to refine their virtual content strategies. Conducting periodic surveys, analyzing engagement metrics, and staying updated on emerging technologies will enable brands to remain competitive and cater to changing consumer expectations.

8. *Educate Consumers on the Benefits of Virtual Content*

Not all consumers are familiar with virtual content technologies, and some may be hesitant to engage with them. Brands should invest in educational campaigns that demonstrate the benefits of AR, VR, and AI-driven recommendations. Tutorials, interactive guides, and influencer collaborations can help educate consumers and encourage adoption, ultimately increasing their comfort and trust in using these digital tools.

9. Evaluate the ROI of Virtual Content Investments

While virtual content can significantly enhance consumer engagement and purchase behavior, brands must assess the return on investment (ROI) of these technologies. By tracking key performance indicators (KPIs) such as conversion rates, engagement metrics, and customer feedback, brands can determine the effectiveness of their virtual content strategies. This data-driven approach will help optimize resource allocation and ensure maximum impact.

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