

# **Social Media Advertising: A Study of UAE University Students Behaviors during (COVID-19)**

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## **Abstract:**

This study investigates the impact of social media advertising on young adults, particularly university students in the United Arab Emirates, during the (COVID-19) pandemic. It aims to understand their preferences, behaviors, and the relationship between demographic variables such as gender, age, and educational level. The study illuminates the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) activities regarding their engagement with ads. Additionally, it examines behavioral buying intention, trust in social media ads, and data privacy concerns regarding targeted ads. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Online Behavioral Advertising (OBA) framework, the study utilizes a quantitative approach with a sample of 200 participants who completed a self-administered questionnaire. The findings suggest that social media advertising significantly influences consumer behaviors among young adults during the pandemic; thus, advertisers can leverage these findings to optimize their advertising strategies and create compelling, influential, and engaging social media campaigns that resonate with their target audience, and to know the suitable way to build the trust.

**Keywords:** Social Media Ads, Covid-19, Young Adults, Consumer Behavior, Buying Intention, Electronic Word-of- Mouth (eWOM), Privacy.

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## الإعلان عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي دراسة لسلوكيات طلبة الجامعات في دولة الإمارات خلال جائحة (كوفيد- ١٩)

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### ملخص الدراسة:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في تأثير إعلانات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على الشباب، وخاصةً طلاب الجامعات في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة خلال جائحة (كوفيد-١٩). كما تهدف إلى فهم تفضيلاتهم وسلوكياتهم والعلاقة بين المتغيرات الديموغرافية مثل الجنس والعمر والمستوى التعليمي. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على أهمية أنشطة التخاطب الإلكتروني (eWOM) ومدى التفاعل مع الإعلانات. بالإضافة إلى، نية الشراء السلوكية، الثقة في إعلانات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، ومخاوف خصوصية البيانات خاصةً في ظل الإعلانات المستهدفة. بالاعتماد على نظرية السلوك المخطط (TPB) وإطار الإعلان السلوكي عبر الإنترنت (OBA)، كما تستخدم الدراسة نهجاً كمياً مع عينة مكونة من ٢٠٠ مشارك أكملوا استبياناً ذاتياً. تشير النتائج إلى أن الإعلان على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي يؤثر بشكل كبير على سلوكيات المستهلكين الشباب أثناء الوباء، والتي يمكن فهمها من عدة جوانب مثل تفاعلهم مع الإعلانات ومخاوفهم بشأن خصوصية بياناتهم. وبالتالي، يمكن للمعلنين الاستفادة من هذه النتائج لتحسين استراتيجياتهم الإعلانية وإنشاء حملات وسائط اجتماعية مقنعة ومؤثرة وجذابة تلقى صدى لدى جمهورهم المستهدف، وإنشاء الثقة لديهم.

**الكلمات الدالة:** إعلانات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، كوفيد-١٩، الشباب، سلوك المستهلك، نية الشراء، أنشطة التخاطب الإلكتروني، الخصوصية.

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### **Introduction:**

Nowadays, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and media technology are spreading diffusional; thus, they impact our daily lives. New technologies change how we contact each other and deal with our surroundings and the whole world. Social media is a new media that provides us with a new level of accessing, creating, and sharing information on any connect-internet device. Unlike traditional media, online media offers us, as users, two-way communication, a form of interaction where both the sender and the receiver can actively participate and respond, giving us the right to express our opinions and engage with content that is relevant to our interests (Procter et al., 2015; Mutiara & Putri, 2023). García-Perdomo et al. (2018: 1180) explain that "users find themselves in a position of power; this position increases the importance of users as they become an active audience. This empowerment of online users is a significant aspect that not only shapes the rush of brands and companies to influence and shape their online experiences but also underscores the significant role and empowerment of each user in shaping the online experience, making them feel influential and significant.

However, the rise of the (COVID-19) pandemic has not only reshaped our lives but also significantly altered our behavior as a consumer. Social media, in particular, has emerged as the primary communication channel for people worldwide. This shift has enabled individuals to stay informed about the latest pandemic-related developments, maintain social connections, and engage in leisure activities. The widespread implementation of quarantine measures by various governments has led to a noticeable surge in social media usage, with individuals spending several hours daily on these platforms. Consequently, there has been a substantial increase in exposure to social media advertisements.

Moreover, it is essential to discover to what extent online users as consumers interact with social media ads during (COVID-19). In this aspect, we can rely on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which turns regular consumers into active participants and potential influencers, as they are empowered to express their opinions, create content, and engage with content and advertisements. As a result,

reviews and recommendations shared on social media can significantly influence the purchasing decisions of other consumers, either positively or negatively (Carlson et al., 2021). The (eWOM) effect is amplified on social media due to its broad reach and ease of sharing content, underscoring the potential influence of each user's opinion.

Understanding the factors that influence consumer engagement with social media ads is not just important; it is crucial. This knowledge can assist in creating personalized and engaging shopping experiences that captivate the audience. Therefore, this study focuses on adults, the most prolific media users and the most receptive to social media ads (Djaked & Raza, 2023). Understanding their interaction with social media platform ads during this unprecedented time is paramount to advertisers.

On the other hand, in the social media field, online users' privacy is one of the most important aspects to study, especially with the high exposure to social media and the rapid development of technological tools. Therefore, this study will underscore the importance of transparent ad targeting practices, personalized content, and clear communication about data usage. It will also discuss how brands and platforms can demonstrate transparency and relevance in their ad targeting strategies, which are more likely to gain the trust of the online consumer and create positive perceptions of social media advertising, making the audience feel secure (Wang et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, data concerning consumer behavior toward social media advertisements during the (COVID-19) pandemic requires further elucidation, particularly in the Middle East and specifically within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Ahmed, 2020). This study investigates the emerging trend of increased social media usage and its impact on consumer behavior during the pandemic, particularly among university students in the United Arab Emirates who are active social media users, meaning they regularly post, share, and engage with content on social media platforms.

This paper not only contributes to the theoretical and practical aspects of communication but also addresses a critical gap in the field. The need for more research on consumer behavior within the communication domain, mainly during crises, is not just a suggestion,

it is a necessity. Thus, this paper aims to bridge this gap by employing the Planned Behavior theory, which helps understand the factors influencing consumer behavior, and the Online Behavioral Advertising framework, which provides a structure for analyzing online advertising strategies. These theories are widely used in communication and media research, particularly in consumer behavior studies in social media marketing. On a practical level, this research will provide scholars with valuable insights into consumer behavior regarding social media advertisements, especially in challenging circumstances. Advertisers, in turn, will benefit from a deeper understanding of their audience's behavior, enabling them to design effective advertisements that meet their objectives.

Consequently, the research aims to examine the behavior of youth towards social media advertisements and the correlation between demographic factors (such as gender, age, and education) and their preferences for various products and services. Furthermore, it will assess their engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) activities and their intentions to purchase. Ultimately, the study seeks to determine the level of trust these individuals place in social media advertisements.

### **Literature Review:**

#### **Social Media Ads and Social Media Users**

Technological advancements have transformed the advertising landscape (Putri et al., 2024). In the past, print media, radio, and television were the main channels for commercial messages. However, social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook) have evolved into more than just communication tools. They have become virtual communities, fostering connections, providing information, enabling content engagement, and facilitating self-expression (Chioma et al., 2016; Vithayathil et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2021; Naeem, 2021; Mutiara & Putri, 2023). This unique market environment, where advertisers and consumers can interact, has been the focus of numerous studies over the past decade, highlighting the platform's potential for advertising (Chioma et al., 2016; Ahmed, 2020; Pan et al., 2020; Geng et al., 2021; Niu et al., 2021).

Furthermore, social media advertising is a relatively new form of promotion (Hussain et al., 2020). It has proven highly effective in enhancing engagement between advertisers and consumers, leading to more impactful and efficient Ads. With the emergence of social media platforms, advertisers have shifted their focus to these mediums to reach a broader consumer base (Maurer & Wiegmann, 2011; Mohanty et al., 2024). This transition has changed not only the tools of advertising but also the approach, with advertisers now tailoring their messages to suit consumer preferences (Ahmed, 2020; Niu et al., 2021; Djaked & Raza, 2023).

Moreover, social media plays a significant role as an information source for online users and is considered a valuable platform for exploring and researching various products and services (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Ayoub & Balawi, 2022). This role empowers users, making them feel informed and knowledgeable about their purchasing decisions. A report by PwC (2019) revealed that in the Middle East, 78% of shoppers use social media platforms for purchase inspiration, a figure 37% higher than the global average.

In this aspect, advertisers use consumers' online data to increase their Ads' efficiency and effectiveness by targeting Ads; they monitor their targeted consumers using data such as location, age, gender, and search history (Boerman et al., 2017; Du, 2023). As a result, it is important to consider the demographic characteristics that may affect the result of any study, especially gender and age (Wolin & Korgaonkar, 2003; McMahan, 2009; Jansen & Solomon, 2010; Střiteský et al., 2016; Akbar, 2020).

However, with the increased usage of social media, especially during the (COVID-19) pandemic, online users faced high exposure to social media advertisements (Ads) (Momoc, 2024). This resulted in Ads overload and led the consumers to "selective exposure," which refers to individuals' preferences for content and ads that reinforce their principles and opinions and satisfy their needs (Haim et al., 2018: 5-6). Thus, this selective exposure behavior poses a challenge for advertisers, as they must navigate the fine line between reaching their target audience and avoiding ad fatigue or ad avoidance. So, balancing relevance and overexposure is essential to maintaining consumer engagement and avoiding negative perceptions of intrusive advertising

practices. Despite that, a comprehensive understanding of how and why consumers engage with social media Ads during crises still needs to be comprehensive.

From this point, it becomes clear that social media ads are an important topic for further study. It is crucial to understand and examine consumers' behavior toward social media ads and their engagement, buying intention, and trust. This understanding can be enhanced by relying on specific theories focusing on these aspects.

### **Consumer Behavior Towards Social Media Ads During (COVID-19) Pandemic**

According to the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Health and Prevention (Ministry of Health [MOH], 2020), the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) "is a new strain of coronavirus that can cause respiratory infections in humans. It was identified in December 2019 in China". In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) stated that (COVID-19) could be determined as a pandemic. Countries' governments decided to implement lockdowns to reduce the spread of the virus, which impacts people worldwide regarding health, social, and economic aspects (InMobi, 2020; Biswas, 2020). Many studies (Syauqi et al., 2019; Tuladhar et al., 2020; Hashem, 2020) explore changes accrue to some aspects of our lives during the (COVID-19) pandemic, such as mobile use and examine the changes in consumers' attitudes and behavior. According to Reddy (2020), the (COVID-19) pandemic changed how people communicate, work, study, and behave; people started to work and study online to avoid infection, which led to changes in their behavior as consumers. However, during the (COVID-19) pandemic, most companies worldwide rely on social media to advertise their products and services. As a result, increased exposure to social media Ads leads to changes in consumer behavior and behavioral intention (Bacay et al., 2022). Accordingly, consumers' behavior is evolving speedily (Wright & Blackburn, 2020), so companies must expect that new kinds of consumers will arise at any time due to the (COVID-19) updates (Vijai & Nivetha, 2020; Rogers & Cosgrove, 2020; Taha et al., 2021). Humans generally have different crisis responses, especially in new and risky crises, so they will try everything to control them (Meyer, 2020).

Consumer behavior has been significant and massively studied by researchers from various fields during the past 50 years (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010; Peighambari et al., 2016; Dudovskiy, n.d). Accordingly, diverse previous research studied this concept (Sheth, 1979; Cohen & Areni, 1991; Vinerean et al., 2013; Senturk & Dumludag, 2021). Consumer behavior is a complex phenomenon that cannot be defined easily, so it has been defined differently in different fields. Scholars (Singh & Singh, 2015; Moon et al., 2015; Nassè, 2021) present overall definitions to understand consumer behavior, so it is a study of individual, group, or organizational behavior that can be direct or indirect behaviors and actions to obtain or buy products, services, or ideas in order to satisfy their needs. This process includes many behavioral, emotional, and mental responses. Also, many internal and external factors affect consumer behavior. Personal factors refer to the influence of individuals' gender, age, occupation, and lifestyle on their behavior and attitude. The psychological factors refer to an individual's beliefs, perceptions, motives, past experience, and learning. The social factors that focus on the role of family, friends, and reference groups influence our decision-making process and behavior patterns. The cultural factors, as each society has its own culture, affect people's beliefs and perceptions according to their cultural values and rules. The economic factors refer to personal and family income (Ramya & Ali, 2016; Qazzafi, 2020; Shukla, 2022; Hubballi & Shyam, 2024).

Social media changed consumers' behavior and decision process, especially how they obtain information about a brand and engage with their content and Ads. At the same time, social media allows consumers to communicate easily about brands' products or services (Talreja & Chaturvedi, 2024); this phenomenon is called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Sarah et al., 2018; Mutiara & Putri, 2023). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004: 39) defined (eWOM) communication as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet." For example, (eWOM) social media members activities, contacting brands companies, following or liking their posts, and sharing brands' posts with others (Pan et al., 2020). Today, (eWOM) has become an



information source for consumers via social media (King et al., 2014) as it reflects consumers' positive or negative attitudes toward social media Ads.

Previous studies have established a direct link between consumers' positive attitudes towards Ads and purchase intentions. A consumer with a favorable view of social media Ads is likelier to purchase the advertised products or services (Pan et al., 2020). As a result, it underscores the effectiveness of advertising strategies in influencing consumer behavior and decision-making.

Furthermore, the use of consumers' online data has enabled advertisers to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their campaigns through targeted advertising strategies. By analyzing information such as users' location, age, gender, and search history, advertisers can customize their ads for specific audiences. However, this practice, while beneficial for free social media platforms that rely on advertising revenue, raises significant concerns about consumer trust and privacy. The ethical implications of these targeted advertising strategies cannot be overlooked (Schumann et al., 2013; Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015; Alzaidi & Agag, 2022; Ligett & Nissim, 2023). Advertisers must balance the need for effective marketing tools with the responsibility to respect consumer privacy and trust, thereby fostering a more ethical advertising environment.

**Theory:**

The theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is widely used to understand and explain individuals' behavior in different fields (e.g., health behavior, social behavior, public relations, and advertising) (Sarah, 2019). The Theory of Planned Behavior developed by Icek Ajzen is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) introduced by Fishbein in 1967 (Knabe, 2012).

However, based on this theory, personal attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, besides the intention, all will influence the actual behavior (Noor et al., 2019). First, an attitude refers to the positive or negative evaluation of something, leading to behavioral intention. Second, subjective norm refers to the role of family, friends, and society in performing a particular behavior. Third, the (TPB) added the component of "perceived behavioral control" that focuses on intention and behavior by referring to the fact that to do

any action, individuals must have the intention and the ability to decide (Ham et al., 2015; Ajzen, 1991; Sanne & Wiese, 2018). As a result, the (TPB) states that consumers who have the perception of the free to choose to perform a particular behavior or not (perceived behavioral control) and have peers who support performing a particular behavior (subjective norms) will have stronger intent to perform the behavior and engage with the Ads (behavioral intent), leading to the actual performance of the behavior by like or share the Ads (behavior) (Ajzen, 1991; Sanne & Wiese, 2018; Sarah, 2019).

Online Behavioral Advertising (OBT), also called "profiling or behavioral targeting" (Bennett, 2011: 899), refers to designed Ads based on online users' activities. Advertisers gather users' online activities (e.g., clicks and search history) and behavior to infer their interests to deliver targeted Ads to serve online users' interests and increase their Ads' efficiency and effectiveness (Boerman et al., 2017). For example, suppose an advertiser tracks a consumer and knows his/her web visits, and this consumer searches for cosmetics-related topics. In that case, the advertiser will assume that this consumer is interested in cosmetics. As a result, cosmetics Ads will increasingly appear to this specific consumer. According to this view, different Ads will appear for different users based on each user's interests (Boerman et al., 2017; Bhattacharya, 2024). In sum, online users' needs and motivations influence the interpretation of an ad (Rodgers, 2002).

Boerman et al. (2017: 363) defined online behavioral advertising (OBA) and developed a "framework that identifies and integrates all factors that can explain consumer responses toward (OBA)." According to the framework, the results of (OBA) based on "consumer-controlled factors," "advertiser-controlled factors," and "Ad's outcomes," which provide an overview of the related theories by determining theories that are used to explore users' responses to (OBA).

At the same time, privacy concerns arise with online behavioral advertising practices. (OBT) refers to advertising that is based on users' online behavior, allowing advertisers to monitor and gather personal data of users and even dissemination, leading to an unethical issue "as consumers are unaware of the persuasion mechanisms that entail (OBA)" (Boerman et al., 2017: 364). Thus, Boerman et al.

(2017) developed a framework that will help this study examine and explore the factors that affect online users' behavior in ignoring or attending social media ads, as it depends on their needs and motives.

**Methodology:**

The study's research method follows a quantitative approach appropriate for a study that examines consumers' behaviors toward social media advertising and the factors influencing those behaviors during the (COVID-19) pandemic.

This study uses a self-administrative questionnaire (SAQ) that provides a comprehensive outlook on students exposed to social media ads, considering individual differences (e.g., gender, age, and educational level). The anonymous surveys create a sense of trust and encourage students to participate in the study and give honest answers. Lastly, the ability to reach a broad audience, collect data in a short time, and have a low-cost play a leading role in researchers selecting the quantitative questionnaire (Gürbüz, 2017).

A structured questionnaire has been meticulously crafted to collect data. It is a researcher-made survey based on previous studies relevant to the study, theoretical frameworks, and research questions. The questionnaire is online through Google Forms, with 200 respondents, male and female youth over the age of 16 at the university level (Undergraduate and Graduate students) from universities in the UAE. The thoroughness of the questionnaire design, based on a wide range of sources, reassures the audience about the study's validity and the robustness of its findings. Subsequently, the questionnaire was distributed and collected from Oct 21 to Nov 21, 2021.

**Statement of the problem:**

Previous research has demonstrated that favorable attitudes towards social media advertising significantly impact consumers, particularly in terms of their engagement with the ads and their intentions to make purchases. However, there needs to be more data on consumers' behavior toward social media ads and the factors influencing their behavior during the (COVID-19) pandemic, especially in the Middle East and specifically in the GCC countries (Ahmed, 2020). This study addresses this gap by focusing on young adult university students in the United Arab Emirates who are active social media users with social media ads. In addition, this study aims to provide insights into

the relationship between their engagement, buying intentions, and trust toward social media ads.

**Research Questions:**

In this context, there are four main research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the products and services categories that university students in the UAE like to watch as ads on social media platforms during the (COVID-19)?

- Is there a relationship between the demographic characteristics of university students in the UAE and the products and services categories they like to watch as ads on social media platforms during the (COVID-19)?

**RQ2:** To what extent do university students in the UAE engage with social media platforms' ads during (COVID-19)?

**RQ3:** How do social media platforms' ads impact purchases of university students in the UAE during (COVID-19)?

**RQ4:** To what extent do university students in the UAE trust social media platforms' ads during (COVID-19)?

**Results**

**Demographic characteristics**

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics

		Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	100	50.0
	<b>Female</b>	100	50.0
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0
<b>Age</b>	<b>Between 16-21</b>	38	19.0
	<b>Between 22-26</b>	77	38.5
	<b>Above 26</b>	85	42.5
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0
<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>Bachelor level</b>	70	35.0
	<b>Master Level</b>	65	32.5
	<b>Ph.D. Level</b>	65	32.5
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0

The first section of the questionnaire focused on demographic characteristics, asking about gender, age, and education level among 200 participants. Results show that out of 200 participants, males and females had the same percentage, as half were males (50%) and half were females (50%). As for the age, it included participants' ages from 16 to 2 (19%), the second category included ages from 22 to 26 (38.5%), and the last category included ages above 26 (42.5%). Finally, the level of education included three categories. The first category included those at the bachelor level, with a percentage of (35%). The second category included those at the Master level, with a percentage of (32.5%). The last category included those at the Ph.D. level, with a percentage of (32.5%) (See Table 1).

### Social Media Usage

**Table ٢.** Social media usage (a)

<b>Why do you use social media platforms in the time of (COVID-19)?</b>		
<b>Frequency</b>		<b>Percent</b>
<b>To keep in touch with friends and family</b>	174	26.8
<b>To access information and news</b>	133	20.5
<b>To waste time</b>	112	17.2
<b>To post/share photos, videos, thoughts, and feelings</b>	104	16.0
<b>To buy and sell</b>	66	10.2
<b>To meet new friends</b>	40	6.2
<b>To find employment</b>	21	3.1
<b>Other</b>	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	650	100.0

The second question explored participants' reasons for using social media, allowing multiple responses. Table 2 shows that the primary reason was to keep in touch with friends and family (26.8%), followed by accessing information and news (20.5%) and wasting time (17.2%). Other reasons included posting or sharing content (16%), buying and selling (10.2%), meeting new friends (6.2%), and finding employment (3.1%).

**Table 3.** Social media usage (b)

Social media usage		Frequency	Percent
How much time on average do you spend on social media platforms per day in the time of (COVID-19)?	Less than 30 minutes	2	1.0
	30-60 minutes	11	5.5
	1-2 hours	29	14.5
	3-5 hours	80	40
	6-8 hours	44	22
	More than 8 hours	34	17
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0
Compare your daily use of social media platforms now and before (COVID-19)	Much lower	4	2.0
	Lower	16	8.0
	About the same	88	44.0
	Higher	66	33.0
	Much higher	26	13.0
<b>Total</b>	200	100.0	

Additionally, the average daily time spent on social media during (COVID-19) showed that (1%) used it for less than 30 minutes, (5.5%) for 30-60 minutes, and (14.5%) for 1-2 hours, while most participants spent 3-5 hours (40%), then (22%) spent 6-8 hours, and (17%) spent more than 8 hours. Regarding changes in usage compared to before COVID-19, only (2%) reported much lower usage, (8%) lower. In comparison (44%) said it remained the same, (33%) indicated it was higher, and (13%) reported much higher usage during the pandemic (See Table 3).

**Social Media Platforms' Advertising**

**Table 4.** Social media platforms' advertising (a)

Social media platforms' advertising		Frequency	Percent
To what extent are you exposed to ads on social media platforms in the time of (COVID-19)?	1 time a day	4	2.0
	2-3 times a day	23	11.5
	4-5 times a day	50	25

	<b>6-7 times a day</b>	49	24.5
	<b>8-9 times a day</b>	31	15.5
	<b>10-15 times a day</b>	17	8.5
	<b>More than 15 times a day</b>	26	13.0
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0
<b>Compare your exposure to social media ads now and before (COVID-19)</b>	<b>Much lower</b>	2	1.0
	<b>Lower</b>	13	6.5
	<b>About the same</b>	86	43.0
	<b>Higher</b>	66	33.0
	<b>Much higher</b>	33	16.5
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0

The third section of the questionnaire examined participants' exposure to social media advertisements during (COVID-19). Table 4 shows that only (2%) reported seeing ads once daily, while (11.5%) saw them 2-3 times. Most participants were exposed 4-5 times a day (25%). Additionally, (24.5%) exposed to ads 6-7 times a day, (15.5%) 8-9 times, (8.5%) 10-15 times, and (13%) exposed more than 15 times. In terms of changes during the pandemic, (1%) indicated much lower exposure, (6.5%) lower, (43%) the same, (33%) higher, and (16.5%) much higher (See Table 4).

**Table 5.** Social media platforms' advertising (b)

<b>Select the products ads categories that you enjoy watching the most in the time of (COVID-19)</b>		
<b>Frequency</b>		<b>Percent</b>
<b>Clothes</b>	119	22
<b>Food/Grocery</b>	107	19.7
<b>Shoes</b>	49	9.0
<b>Games</b>	41	7.6
<b>Perfumes</b>	36	6.6
<b>Watches/Jewelry</b>	35	6.5
<b>Electronics</b>	35	6.5

Select the products ads categories that you enjoy watching the most in the time of (COVID-19)		
Personal care products (hair, skin, nails...)	34	6.3
Sporting products/Fitness Supplements	26	4.8
Make-up and its accessories	25	4.6
Furniture/Decor	17	3.1
Pet grooming products	7	1.3
Medicines/Protection products/Food Supplements	6	1.1
Handicraft products/Stationery	5	0.9
Other	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>542</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Participants were asked to select the product categories for ads they enjoyed watching. The most product categories as follows: (22%) clothing ads, (19.7%) food and grocery ads, (9%) shoe ads, (7.6%) game ads, (6.6%) perfume ads, (6.5%) watches and jewelry, and (6.5%) electronics (See Table 5).

**Table 6.** *Social media platforms' advertising (c)*

Select the services ads categories that you enjoy watching the most in the time of (COVID-19)		
Frequency		Percent
Entertainment ads (Movies/ Netflix...)	154	34.5
Artistic ads (musical/literary/shooting/painting...)	79	17.7
Sports ads (Coaching services...)	57	12.7
Educational ads (learning skill/language...)	54	12.1
Internal/external tourism ads (entertainment places...)	53	11.9
Health ads (medical examination/medical review services...)	50	11.1
Other	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>100.0</b>

While for services, most participants (34.5%) enjoyed entertainment ads. Then, (17.7%) enjoyed artistic services, (12.7%) enjoyed sports services, (12.1%) enjoyed educational ads, and (11.9%) enjoyed



tourism services. Lastly, (11.1%) enjoyed health services (See Table 6).

**Social media platforms' ads and purchase intention**

The fourth section of the questionnaire explored participants' purchase intentions regarding social media ads during (COVID-19).

**Table 7.** Social media platforms' ads and purchase intention (a)

<i>To which extent do these statements describe you in the time of (COVID-19)</i>							
<i>Statement</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Social media ads have a positive impact on my purchase's decisions</i>	18 9%	65 32.5%	66 33%	31 15.5%	20 10%	3.15	200
<i>I prefer buying products/services through social media ads</i>	19 9.5%	39 19.5%	67 33.5%	52 26%	23 11.5%	2.90	200
<i>I am using social media for searching for products/services</i>	24 12%	61 30.5%	56 28%	38 19%	21 10.5%	3.15	200

Table 7 shows that (32.5%) agreed that social media ads positively impact their purchase decisions, while (15.5%) disagreed. Additionally, (19.5%) preferred buying through social media ads, (26%) disagreed. Also (30.5%) used social media for product searches, and (19%) did not.

**Table 8.** Social media platforms' ads and purchase intention (b)

<b>Social media platforms' ads and purchase intention</b>			
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>In the time of (COVID-19), how many purchases did you make through social media platforms' ads?</b>	<b>0</b>	25	12.5
	<b>1-3 purchases</b>	80	40.0
	<b>4-6 purchases</b>	53	26.5
	<b>7-10 purchases</b>	24	12.0
	<b>More than 10 purchases</b>	18	9.0
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0

Regarding purchases made through social media ads, (40%) reported making 1-3 purchases, (26.5%) made 4-6 purchases, (12.5%) made 0 purchases, (12%) made 7-10 purchases, and (9%) made more than ten purchases (See Table 8).

**Table 9.** *Social media platforms' ads and purchase intention (c)*

<i>Rate the following factors on how they affect you to purchase from social media ads in the time of (COVID-19)?</i>							
<i>Factors</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Family and friends' recommendations</i>	43 21.5%	78 39%	53 26.5%	12 6%	14 7%	3.62	200
<i>Users' comments on social media</i>	40 20%	67 33.5%	59 29.5%	22 11%	12 6%	3.51	200
<i>Ads include my favorite celebrities/influencers</i>	19 9.5%	47 23.5%	73 36.5%	34 17%	27 13.5%	2.99	200
<i>Ads include offers/ discount codes/contests</i>	44 22%	70 35%	55 27.5%	24 12%	7 3.5%	3.60	200
<i>Product/service price</i>	57 28.5%	76 38%	47 23.5%	10 5%	10 5%	3.80	200
<i>Quality of product/service itself</i>	60 30%	81 40.5%	43 21.5%	10 5%	6 3%	3.90	200
<i>Product/service brand</i>	47 23.5%	73 36.5%	55 27.5%	18 9%	7 3.5%	3.68	200

In addition, participants rated factors influencing their purchase intentions: (40.5%) agreed that product quality influences decisions (5% disagreed), (39%) noted family and friends' recommendations (6% disagreed), (38%) felt product price matters (5% disagreed), and (36.5%) were influenced by brand (9% disagreed). Additionally, (35%) were affected by ads featuring offers or discounts (12% disagreed), (33.5%) agreed that user comments influence intentions (11% disagreed), and (23.5%) agreed that celebrity or influencer endorsements impact decisions (17% disagreed) (See Table 9).

**Social media platforms' ads and engagement**

**Table 10.** *Social media platforms' ads and engagement (a)*

<i>In the time of (COVID-19), rate your interaction with social media platforms' ads in terms of</i>							
<i>Elements</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Like</i>	35 17.5%	44 22%	48 24%	42 21%	31 15.5%	3.05	200
<i>Comment</i>	12 6%	31 15.5%	41 20.5%	60 30%	56 28%	2.42	200
<i>Share</i>	26 13%	40 20%	59 29.5%	44 22%	31 15.5%	2.93	200
<i>Follow</i>	24 12%	45 22.5%	53 26.5%	48 24%	30 15%	2.93	200
<i>Contact the advertiser/customer service</i>	25 12.5%	42 21%	61 30.5%	40 20%	32 16%	2.94	200
<i>Read customers' comments</i>	68 34%	58 29%	43 21.5%	24 12%	7 3.5%	3.78	200
<i>Save it for viewing later</i>	56 28%	56 28%	43 21.5%	26 13%	19 9.5%	3.52	200

The fifth section of the questionnaire examined participants' engagement with social media ads during (COVID-19). When asked about their interactions with ads: (30.5%) often contact the advertiser,

(29.5%) often share ads with others, (26.5%) often follow the advertiser' account, (24%) often click "like" on ads. In addition, (21.5%) often read customer comments, (21.5%) often save ads for later, lastly (20.5%) often write comment on ads (See Table 10).

**Table 11.** *Social media platforms' ads and engagement (b)*

<b>Social media platforms' ads and engagement</b>			
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>In the time of (COVID-19), when you share an ad with others, do you make sure to be familiar with the brand?</b>	<b>Always</b>	36	18.0
	<b>Usually</b>	44	22.0
	<b>Often</b>	61	30.5
	<b>Seldom</b>	17	8.5
	<b>I do not care; it is enough that I liked the ad</b>	25	12.5
	<b>Never share social media platforms' ad</b>	17	8.5
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0
<b>In the time of (COVID-19), if you see an ad that includes offers or discounts, do you share it with your family/friends?</b>	<b>Always</b>	44	22.0
	<b>Usually</b>	66	33.0
	<b>Often</b>	51	25.5
	<b>Seldom</b>	19	9.5
	<b>No</b>	7	3.5
	<b>Never share social media platforms' ad</b>	13	6.5
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0

When asked about brand familiarity before sharing ads, (30.5%) often ensure they know the brand, (22%) usually check, (18%) always check, (12.5%) do not care as long as they like the ad, (8.5%) seldom check, and (8.5%) never share ads. Regarding sharing ads that include offers or discounts, (33%) usually share them, (25.5%) often share, (22%) always share, (9.5%) seldom share, (6.5%) never share, and (3.5%) would not share at all (See table 11).

**Social media platforms' ads and trust**

The final section of the questionnaire examined participants' trust in social media ads during (COVID-19).

**Table 12.** Social media platforms' ads and trust (a)

Social media platforms' ads and trust			
		Frequency	Percent
In the time of (COVID-19), which one do you value more?	The privacy of your data	95	47.5
	The privacy of your online activities	57	28.5
	The personalization of ads	48	24.0
	<b>Total</b>	200	100.0

Participants were asked to choose which one they valued more, (47.5%) valued data privacy the most, (28.5%) valued the privacy of their online activities, and (24%) preferred the personalization of ads (See Table 12).

**Table 13.** Social media platforms' ads and trust (b)

In the time of (COVID-19), to which extent do you							
Statements	Extremely	Very	Moderately	Slightly	Not at all	Mean	N
Trust ads on social media	3 1.5%	24 12%	71 35.5%	76 38%	26 13%	2.51	200

<i>In the time of (COVID-19), to which extent do you</i>								
<i>Concern that social media platforms customize ads based on your online activities</i>	30	42	73	33	22	3.13	200	
	15%	21%	36.5%	16.5%	11%			
<i>Concern that social media platforms customize ads based on your personal data</i>	32	45	61	40	22	3.13	200	
	16%	22.5%	30.5%	20%	11%			

Regarding overall trust, (12%) of participants expressed strong trust in social media ads, while (38%) had slight trust. Regarding concerns, (21%) were very worried about ads based on their online activities, (16.5%) were slightly concerned, (22.5%) were very concerned about ads targeting personal data, and (20%) were slightly concerned (See Table 13).

**Discussion**

This study examined the effects of social media advertising during the (COVID-19) pandemic on university students in UAE in different aspects.

The result of the first research question reveals that gender significantly influences product and service preferences. Female participants preferred ads for clothing, personal care, makeup, furniture, and stationery, while male participants favored ads for games, electronics, and sports. Additionally, females were more interested in ads for artistic services, whereas males preferred ads for sports services. Age and educational level did not significantly affect ad preferences.

Few studies have examined consumer preferences for social media ads or the relationship between their demographic characteristics and preferences during the pandemic (Mehta, 2020; Mason et al., 2021). PwC's (2020) survey indicated increased spending on groceries, entertainment, and media, aligning with this study, while spending on

clothing and footwear decreased, contradicting research findings. Similarly, according to Jungle Scout (2021), statistics found that men tend to purchase games, electronics, and sports products more than women, which supports this study's results. On the other hand, Seberini and Tokovska (2021) found that product preferences during (COVID-19) for their research participants were consecutively following: cosmetics and toiletries, drugs and vitamins, clothing, groceries, DIY and home improvement, and electronics.

The second research question found that many participants were exposed to social media ads multiple times a day during the (COVID-19) pandemic.- this aligns with Mason et al. (2021) findings, which noted increased exposure to social media ads due to companies ramping up their digital advertising efforts during the pandemic.

However, the (COVID-19) pandemic has transformed how individuals engage with technology and social media. This section explores the factors influencing engagement levels during this pandemic. Studies indicate that ad content relevant to users' interests and Ads that evoke positive emotions, such as humor or happiness, significantly boost engagement. Additionally, positive engagement is often linked to social media influencers and peer recommendations (Kwiattek et al., 2021; Anh; 2024).

One key finding from this research is that social media has changed how consumers access brand information and make purchasing decisions. Users can easily engage with brands by following, liking, sharing posts, and contacting companies directly. This two-way interaction creates a more personalized and engaging relationship, significantly influencing consumers' purchase intentions and decisions (Huang et al., 2024).

The third research question explored how social media platforms' ads impact the purchase intention of university students in the UAE during (COVID-19) pandemic.

The results indicate that many participants find social media ads influential in shaping their purchasing behavior, viewing them as compelling and persuasive. However, they still prefer other purchasing channels due to trust, security, and convenience concerns.

Despite this, a significant number of participants use social media as a primary source for searching for products and services.

In fact, several factors influence participants' purchase decisions through social media ads, including product quality and recommendations from family and friends. Positive comments boost buyer confidence, highlighting the importance of electronic word-of-mouth marketing (eWOM). Additionally, attractive pricing, deals, and discounts draw online users' attention, along with brand reputation and ads featuring favorite celebrities or influencers. It is worth mentioning that these findings align with various studies (Shaheen, 2010; King et al., 2014; Pan et al., 2020).

The last research question explores the extent to which university students in the UAE trust social media platforms' ads during (COVID-19).

According to the results, most participants feel that ads are personalized to their preferences, which fosters positive attitudes toward the ads. At this point, they trust platforms with a privacy policy, ensuring their data is not shared without permission. However, participants also remain cautious about their online activities due to monitoring by social media ads, leading to varying levels of trust, data privacy, and satisfaction with ad targeting transparency.

Furthermore, participants' concerns about data privacy highlight the necessity for platforms and advertisers to reassure users regarding data protection. Implementing clear privacy policies and empowering users with control over their data can enhance trust and strengthen relationships between consumers and social media advertising (Geng et al., 2021; Alzaidi & Agag; 2022; Bhattacharya, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our research on social media advertising and its impact on UAE university students during the (COVID-19) pandemic reveals significant insights into their engagement with social media. The pandemic, by necessitating students to spend more time indoors, led to increased usage of these platforms, resulting in notable changes in priorities and consumption patterns. Ultimately, the pandemic fostered new consumer behaviors.



Our research underscores the crucial role of understanding user behaviors in creating effective advertising campaigns. The rise of social media and online advertising has transformed the advertising landscape, empowering users as active participants and presenting advertisers with new opportunities. However, the increased use of social media during the (COVID-19) pandemic has led to an 'Ads-overload' phenomenon. While targeted ads improve relevance, excessive advertising can result in user overwhelm, leading to selective exposure and ad avoidance. Thus, research in this domain remains critical to staying attuned to changing user behaviors and preferences, enabling advertisers to adapt and thrive in this dynamic digital era.

The results provide valuable insights into UAE university students' perceptions of advertising, data privacy concerns, and satisfaction with social media ads. Overall, understanding trust and privacy issues can help inform strategies for advertisers and platforms to create more effective and responsible campaigns. By addressing these concerns and delivering personalized, relevant content, advertisers can enhance their impact on this demographic while respecting data privacy preferences.

Moreover, the research results provide insights into the main factors that impact university students' purchase intentions through social media ads during the (COVID-19) period. Advertisers can leverage these findings to optimize their advertising strategies and develop compelling, impactful, and engaging social media campaigns that resonate with their target audience.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the study's limitations, including the sample size, demographic composition, and specific context of the (COVID-19) period, which may affect the results. Future research with a more diverse and representative sample and a broader time frame would enhance understanding consumer attitudes toward social media ads and purchase intentions. Additionally, qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide deeper insights into participants' motivations and responses.

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