

## Social Media-Causing Dissonance User Product Switching

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### Abstract

A well-known psychological phenomenon called cognitive dissonance the state of the psyche which appears in the case of inconsistent beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours has long been considered the decisive factor in consumer decision-making. This is increased in the modern context of ubiquitous social media where users often end up dropping the products of their choice at first in reaction to post purchase guilt inspired by social media forces. The article under consideration studies the role of social media sites in enhancing the level of cognitive dissonance so that consumers can be prompted to replace one product with another. Based on theoretical foundations in the areas of psychology and marketing, the study argues that exposure to conflicting information, peer reviews and recommendation of influencers on social media increase dissonance and leads to brand or products switching behaviour. The qualitative approach as the methodology involved the semi-structured interviews with consumers who had undergone product switching due to dissonance caused by social media. Thematic analysis revealed several important patterns, such as how algorithmic feeds amplify conflicting narratives and how emotional social comparison can be. The results show that the dissonance state is especially severe in high-involvement purchases, including electronics and fashion, in which social media serves as a stimulus to reconsideration. These insights are combined with the existing literature and implications of the discussion are made to the marketers in alleviating dissonance by deploying specific strategies. In the end, the article adds to the improved knowledge on digital consumer behaviour, and it is important to note that ethical practices on social media are required to minimize unnecessary switches and maximize satisfaction.

**Key Words:** Social Media, Cognitive Dissonance, Product Switching, Brand Switching, Platform Switching

### Introduction

In the modern digital environment, the social media as a communication tool has become more a force to be reckoned with in terms of its influence on consumers behaviour. Having billions of users all over the world, platforms like Instagram, Twitter (now X), Tik Tok, and Facebook influence perceptions, tastes, and buying behavior. However, this power is not necessarily positive, it may give rise to cognitive dissonance, which is a concept developed by Leon Festinger in 1957 to refer to the psychological unease that a person will experience when they perceive incompatible thoughts.<sup>1</sup> This dissonance is common in consumer settings, where satisfaction with purchase is often followed by doubts after facing conflicting information on the internet.<sup>2</sup> The title of the

<sup>1</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> Razan Ibrahim Awad et al., *"Facts or Belief: Examining the Effect of the Cognitive Dissonance on Brand Switching,"* Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication (2023).

article, Dissonance Causing User Product Switching Due to Social Media, summarizes the overall hypothesis: social media is a mediator, which increases the level of cognitive dissonance, and which eventually leads to product switching. Product switching is the tendency of one consumer to leave one brand or product to go and use another with sometimes costs of time, money and effort. This is becoming more common in e-commerce, where post-purchase regrets of 20-30 - percent of purchases are common in most industries, in part due to the amplification of social media.<sup>3</sup> Its theoretical foundations can be traced back to the theory of Festinger who has assumed that people attempt to decrease dissonance by either changing their attitudes or by means of selective exposure or rationalisation.<sup>4</sup> This in marketing means that the consumers seek confirmatory information or, alternatively, change products to conform to new beliefs.<sup>5</sup> The process is sped up by social media because it offers immediate access to the user-created content and reviews as well as opinions of influencers that might not align with the expectations prior to purchasing.<sup>6</sup> As an example, a customer who buys a smartphone after advertisements may find negative comments on Reddit or videos that go viral on Tik Tok and point out the negative sides, causing dissonance and making them switch to a rival.<sup>7</sup> This association is backed up by facts. Research has established that post-purchase social media exposure can influence cognitive balance, which will cause dissatisfaction and returns.<sup>8</sup> In addition, when the environment is overly blanketed with heterogeneous opinions, users become displeased turning to avoidant behaviours which include selective avoidance or in the worst scenario, product abandonment.<sup>9</sup> The article attempts to explore this phenomenon further using a qualitative approach, which is grounded on the lived experiences of the consumers. The study questions are (1) How does social media cause cognitive dissonance when using products? (2) How do we get dissonance to product switching? (3) What does it mean in terms of consumer loyalty and marketing strategy? With these questions answered, the study will have a relevant contribution to the academic discourse in consumer psychology and digital marketing and will provide the information that can be published in such highest-tier journals like the Journal of Consumer Research or the Journal of Marketing. The later sections are literature reviews, methodology, findings, implications and conclusion with recommendations.

## Literature Review

This cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) has been instrumental in consumer research since it was adopted by psychology. Festinger (1957) assumed the existence of the dissonance that is created due to inconsistencies, which encourages resolution strategies.<sup>10</sup> This is applicable in marketing in post-purchase situations where buyers would defend or need an assurance.<sup>11</sup> Early researchers like

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<sup>3</sup> . Florence Hu and Gao Wei, *"The Impact of the Knowledge Sharing in Social Media on Consumer Behavior"* (paper, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid,1.

<sup>5</sup> Banu Küller Demirgüneş and Mutlu Yüksel Avcılar, *"The Effect of Cognitive Dissonance on External Information Search,"* International Journal of Business Administration 8, no. 2 (2017): 57–70

<sup>6</sup> Saba Muneer et al., *"Social Media Use: A Cognitive Dissonance Analysis,"* The Asian Bulletin of Big Data Management 4, no. 3 (2024): 79–103

<sup>7</sup> Shuwei Zhang and Younghwan Pan, *"Mind over Matter,"* Behavioral Sciences 13, no. 3 (2023): 254.

<sup>8</sup> Minjeong Jeong et al., *"Feeling Displeasure from Online Social Media Postings,"* Computers in Human Behavior 97 (2019): 231–240.

<sup>9</sup> Moira Lawler, *"Cognitive Dissonance in Ads, Marketing, and Media,"* Everyday Health, September 21, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid,1.

<sup>11</sup> William H. Cummings and M. Venkatesan, *"Cognitive Dissonance and Consumer Behavior,"* Journal of Marketing Research 13, no. 3 (1976): 303–308,

that of Cummings and Venkatesan (1976) addressed the issue of dissonance in decision-making, which was found to affect pleasure and remorse.<sup>12</sup> New extensions discuss dissonance on the internet. Indicatively, consumer confusion due to misleading information will result into errors in purchasing and consequent dissonance.<sup>13</sup> Quantitative results demonstrate that dissonance influences brand switching and purchase regret, the results of which are mediated by the level of satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> The social media presents new dynamics to CDT. Platforms will enable fast exchange of information, exposing the user to different perspectives that will disrupt the already held beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Interaction with conflicting messages causes more dissonance in heavy users, causing them to feel uncomfortable. Research on online consumers in Indonesia revealed that demographics moderate dissonance albeit, cross-cultural factors are mitigating.<sup>16</sup> In a more direct way, social media is influencing cognitive balance and causing the dissonance and possible switching. Playing a major role is the role of influencers; when the products are not up to expectations influencers can reduce the dissonance by reframing the experiences and diminishing the switching probability.<sup>17</sup> Contextual differences are brought out in qualitative explorations. On social media, dissonance is not as dialogic as in a face-to-face interaction and, therefore, it affects the way users receive conflicting product information.<sup>18</sup> In addition, dissatisfaction with posting results in selective exposure, with the resultant user not viewing dissonant content and possibly changing products in case of avoidance failure.<sup>19</sup>

Product switching is the end result of unresolved dissonance. When it comes to brand switching, literature presents that dissonance results in regrets, dissatisfaction, and eventual switch of brand. In online worlds, this is worsened through the simple availability of alternatives through social media recommendations.<sup>20</sup> Research into the non-linear use of social media in itself compares to product switching, in which the overload leads to dissonance and rejection. To the products, social media marketing is able to mitigate dissonance but fails in most cases when the content is incompatible.<sup>21</sup> Literature gaps involve a lack of qualitative information on lived experience of switching as a consequence of dissonance caused by social media. Majority of the research is quantitative, involving use of models and surveys. This article deals with it by explaining a qualitative approach to prominently subtle themes.

## Methodology

This research paper is qualitative research design to investigate subtleties of the social media causing cognitive dissonance that causes product switching. Qualitative research is suitable when exploring subjective experiences where the rich descriptions of the phenomena that cannot be easily quantified are needed. The method of the proposed study is semi-structured interviews with 20-25 respondents who are going to be chosen through purposive sampling. The criteria are adults (18 +) who have changed their product in the past year based on social media effects (targeting such categories as fashion, electronics, or beauty where dissonance is prevalent). The sample will be selected using online forums and social media calls so that there is diversity in terms of age, gender and cultural orientation to capture diverse views. Interviews will be done as a virtual

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid,11.

<sup>13</sup> Saranya and Joji Alex N., "*Consumer Confusion on Cognitive Dissonance.*"

<sup>14</sup> Awwad et al., "*Facts or Belief.*"

<sup>15</sup> Muneer et al., "*Social Media Use.*"

<sup>16</sup> Ibid,15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid,

<sup>18</sup> Jeong et al., "*Feeling Displeasure.*"

<sup>19</sup> Lawler, "*Cognitive Dissonance in Ads.*"

<sup>20</sup> Zhang and Pan, "*Mind over Matter.*"

<sup>21</sup> Ibid,

session using Zoom, as it is more accessible and last 45-60 minutes. An interviewer using open-ended questions will inquire about experiences: What is a time when social media caused you to doubt a recent purchase, how did mixed online content feel to you, and What made you change the product? This gives it the advantage of emergent themes.

## **Findings**

Thematic analysis of the interview data demonstrates that there are four major themes of how social media creates a sense of dissonance and induces product switching.

### **Theme 1: Exposure to Diminishing Narratives.**

Buyers also often reported receiving conflicting post-sale reviews. A consumer who purchased a skincare product because of the Instagram advertising also viewed Tik Tok videos revealing side effects, which caused dissonance between anticipated positive effects and actual results. This disconnect created remorse and the respondents said the hype was not paralleled with the reality. Algorithms that intensify the presence of viral content increase the level of discomfort, which results in switching as a source of solution. During the exploration phase in electronics, disagreements in experts on forums like Reddit lead to users questioning durability and the returns occur. These results resonate with those that have demonstrated the fact that diverse views cause dissatisfaction.

### **Theme 2: Peer and Influencer.**

Dissonance is increased through a social comparison through the post of peers. The interviewees said that when their friends had superior product experiences online, they got envious and their friends made them rethink. Some of the participants reported that they switched brands after seeing the perfect photos of my friend with a different brand, which made their own photos inferior. Similarly, influencers worsened this relationship; when positive praises of substitutes are received after purchase, a sense of inadequacy occurs and loyalty is destroyed. The dissonance is more engagement based among heavy users.

### **Theme 3: The Emotional and Psychological Toll.**

Dissonance is in the form of anxiety, frustration or shame. The stories draw attention to the fact that the fact of constant connection in social media increases the duration of this emotional load, which did not exist in the pre-digital times. One user changed fitness apps because X had received dissonant feedback loops, which a user characterized as a state of mental exhaustion because of defending my choice on the internet. Intensity is determined by demographics; according to millennials, they are more prone to it because of platform immersion. Harmony is maintained by switching the nature of the resolution.

### **Theme 4: Switching Mechanisms.**

The switching is done in conscious efforts: research, confirmatory bias, purchasing on impulse triggered by advertisements. There were elements that the participants experienced involuntarily, including the push of competitors by the algorithms. The results are temporary relief and possible recurrence in case of new products dissonance. On the whole, the results support the idea that social media can be used as a catalyst of dissonance, and switching is one of the most common strategies.

## **Discussion**

The results clarify the contribution of social media in the intensification of cognitive dissonance which is consistent with extension of CDT. The conflicting stories and influence factors support the disruption of post-purchase equilibrium through platforms resulting in switching.

Theoretically, this deepens the dissonance resolution knowledge in the context of the online world where selective exposure can break down and requires a change of behaviour including switching. In practice, marketers must develop positive after sales relationship, such as community building, to overcome the negative effects. Weaknesses are the lack of empirical evidence; the given methodology can be applied in future studies. The issue of cross-cultural diversity should be explored more.

## **Conclusion**

Social media has become a relevant stimulator of post-purchase cognitive dissonance in the modern consumer society that significantly eases product transfer, brand transfer, and sometimes switching platform. The study that is anchored on the theory of cognitive dissonance as suggested by Festinger (1957) and enhanced with the implementation of the qualitative information gathered as the result of the interviews with consumers who have actively changed their buying behavior due to the social media exposure proves that the digital environment contributes significantly to the development of the psychological discomfort that is traditionally linked to the high-involvement purchases. The thematic analysis yielded four main themes, namely (1) exposure to attenuating and conflicting narratives amplified by algorithmic curation; (2) an increased dissonance created by comparing oneself to others and being influenced by the recommendations of an influencer to switch to the competitor; (3) an intense affective and psychological cost that is manifested as anxiety, regrets, and cognitive exhaustion; and (4) a heterogeneous switching mechanism that spans between a deliberate, information-seeking search and involuntary, algorithm-based suggestion of switching to the rival. These results support and build up existing literature by demonstrating how the speed, width, and interactivity of sites like Instagram, TikTok, X, and Reddit undermine the traditional boundaries of selective exposure by placing the consumer in a position of restricted opportunity to engage in rationalisation or avoidance of dissonant information. The implication of this study is far-reaching. Social media-inflicted dissonance continues to be a threat to marketers, hence making their urgent requirement to shift their pre-purchase hype engine to post-purchase engagement frameworks. Tactics like real community building, clear influencer partnerships, proactive reassurance material and positive reinforcement that suits the algorithm can significantly decrease switching behaviour and protect brand loyalty. In the case of platform providers, the moral duty is clear-cut: the unregulated amplification of conflicting or scandalous content by the algorithm itself is the direct cause of customer dissatisfaction, unhealthy patterns of consumption and possible psychological health issues.

Finally, a paradoxical truth of the digital age: the very system of social media that enables both discovery and connection has also become a major source of uncertainty, remorse, and turmoil. As e-commerce continues to pick up pace and post purchase regrets fall within a range of 2030 percent within all industries, the issue of cognitive dissonance as a result of social media is no longer a discretionary matter, it is an imperative to commerce and ethics. The future research should add on such qualitative principles by creating larger, cross-cultural and longitudinal research designs to measure the phenomenon and optimize intervention strategies. The potential of social media can only be re-focused to this rather than remaining as an ongoing source of dissonance when all the marketers and platforms are involved, the regulators and the consumers can make the social media a true enabling factor of informed, satisfying and long-lasting purchase decisions.

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