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Designing a Model of Customers' Purchase Intention with Emphasis on Social Media: Based on Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This research aimed to design a model to explore customers' purchase intention in the organic industry among the users of Hmrah Aval. The qualitative study adopted the grounded theory approach. The statistical population consisted of professors, specialists, and experts with a minimum of 15 years of experience in the fields of organic products, marketing, and sales. Using purposive sampling, a sample of 15 individuals was selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the MAXQDA software was employed at all stages of analysis. Reliability and validity were checked by participant reviews and input from non-participating experts. The data and findings were validated by incorporating corrective comments into the final model. Data analysis was based on the techniques recommended by Strauss and Corbin (grounded theory), involving the identification of causal conditions, contextual conditions, core phenomena, strategies, and consequences. Based on these elements, a comprehensive final model was developed. The results mainly show that traditional and modern media both play an effective role in purchasing intention. However, the role of traditional media is still greater. Gradually, the present project aimed to increase the use of standardized social media platforms among various customer segments, particularly among the younger ones.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the numerous benefits of healthy foods, the significance of consuming these products has become increasingly apparent to scientists, policymakers, and consumers (Kheyrolahi et al., 2021). Considering the rise in life-threatening diseases in recent years, the consumption of healthy and organic foods has been recognized as a vital necessity for maintaining the health of society as a whole. Consequently, measures have been implemented to support and promote the production of healthy and organic goods (Sandouqi et al., 2021). Consequently, many countries worldwide have embraced organic agriculture as a sustainable economic, social, and ecological system to produce nutritious food, preserve the nutritional value of products, and reduce water and soil pollution (Keshavarz & Mousavi, 2018). Presently, issues such as food quality and safety have garnered attention from consumers and have influenced their purchasing behavior (Kheyrolahi et al., 2021). Particularly in the past two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, this process gained momentum. In this context, social media has provided numerous avenues for companies to enhance their marketing practices, turning it into an indispensable component of the contemporary marketing landscape (Liu et al., 2018; Keller & Fay, 2012).

With the growing influence of social media in people's daily lives and its introduction into the business realm, it has emerged as a powerful tool that has transformed marketing strategies and given rise to modern marketing practices. Consequently, many organizations have embraced and utilized social media to their advantage. One notable application is the use of social media as a means to gather consumer data. Social media platforms aid companies in establishing and nurturing strong customer relationships, thereby enhancing their business reputation and brand image (Rahimnia et al., 2019). In the current critical climate, they have become an integral part of people's daily lives, serving as

a means of communication, information sharing, and knowledge dissemination (Khaleghi et al., 2020).

With the constraints imposed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many job opportunities have been limited or even eliminated. Consequently, managers have had to consider the use of social media platforms to promote their services and products in order to sustain their businesses and attract customers. As a result, marketing managers strive to gain a better understanding of their customers' attitudes toward social media, as it directly impacts purchasing behavior in the real market. Research suggests that customers with positive attitudes toward social media are more likely to exhibit the desired purchasing behavior, given the current circumstances (Naghizadeh Shamili & Tabatabai Nasab, 2016). Social media has evolved into a platform for creating social networks, serving as a fundamental framework for marketing and influencing customers' purchasing decisions (Alalwan, 2018).

However, the rapid growth of social media in recent years has raised questions regarding whether this growth has eroded managers' and marketers' control over brand management, or whether it has significantly influenced customers' purchase intentions. Findings from recent studies indicate a shift in customer behavior, with increasing reliance on social media as a source for information seeking, as opposed to traditional media channels like television, radio, and magazines (Farhangi et al., 2014). Recent research suggests that social media is considered a more reliable source of information compared to traditional marketing communication tools utilized by companies. It appears that modern social media platforms can exert a greater influence on people's attitudes and behaviors when compared to traditional collective and written media. However, quantitative tests indicate that despite the advantages of new social media, trust in these platforms as customers is essential for envisioning positive outcomes

from their use. This reflects the current reality for customers in the statistical community, while multiple studies have demonstrated that advertising through traditional media is more costly and time-consuming than utilizing modern media (Salvatian et al., 2018). Consequently, new media has the potential to achieve remarkable results in a shorter time-frame and at a lower cost.

In recent years, social media has gained unprecedented global popularity, with millions of individuals worldwide joining virtual social networks and engaging in various social, cultural, economic, and political activities within these platforms. Iranian users have also exhibited a significant trend of participation in different social media sites (Shahabi & Bayat, 2012). For instance, statistics from 2019 revealed that there were 3.414 billion users of various social networks worldwide, with 47 million users in Iran, indicating a penetration rate of 57 percent for social messaging networks within the country. Additionally, there were 49 million users of mobile social networks in Iran, while globally, the number had surpassed 3.252 billion. Recent statistics suggest an even more significant increase in the number of users during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to lifestyle and workstyle changes caused by the virus's spread, virtualization of various activities, including the purchase of goods and services, has surged in Iran, as in other countries, through the use of social media. However, the results in the business sector have not yet reached the desired level. Possible reasons include customer distrust in virtual transactions, lack of integrity in business interactions, limited knowledge, and the nascent nature of virtual business under new media.

Previous studies have demonstrated that user interactions and word-of-mouth communication in social networks can influence users' future purchase intentions (Hajli & Sims, 2015; Liang & Turban, 2011). Therefore, conducting business through social media entails a combination of commercial

and social activities. In many developing countries, the impact of social media on customers' brand attitudes has been emphasized, as customers form favorable or unfavorable beliefs regarding its influence (Lim et al., 2017).

Customers' attitude toward a brand represents their internal evaluation of it. Attitudes are formed through the interpretation, evaluation, and integration of information and motivations. Generally, a brand attitude refers to a customer's positive or negative perception of a brand (Athanasios & Chrysochou, 2014). Factors such as customers' attitudes toward the product and brand significantly influence their behavioral intentions and willingness to make a purchase. Consequently, it is crucial for managers and business owners to engage in effective two-way interactions with customers and consumers to secure their satisfaction and loyalty. Despite the notable success of leading global companies in this regard, companies within Iran's statistical society have not been able to fully embrace this concept. Despite the competition among Iranian companies to attract customers, creating the desired attitudes among managers and customers in the statistical community remains a challenge, mainly due to the limited utilization of essential infrastructures and platforms like the Internet and social media. This could be attributed to a lack of necessary knowledge among individuals in relevant fields (Shirkhodaei et al., 2017).

Based on these considerations, the primary objective of this article was to propose a model to elucidate customers' purchase intention for organic products through social media. To accomplish this objective, the following questions were formulated: What are the causal, axial, intervening, and contextual conditions, as well as the strategies and consequences involved in designing a model of customers' purchase intention with a focus on social media? Additionally, to what extent does the presented model align with the observed field reality of the studied society and

contribute to managerial decision-making processes?

Background

The emergence of social networking sites like MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 played a pivotal role in popularizing the term "social media." Additionally, the term "Web 2.0" was coined to describe the new utilization of the internet, where content is no longer solely created and published by individuals but continuously modified by numerous users in a collaborative and cooperative manner (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There is a general belief that the content generated by internet users, who are also consumers, is independent of commercial influences. As a result, consumers rely on forums, blogs, and other unbiased sources in social media for information when making purchasing decisions (Powers et al., 2012).

Through applications within social networking websites, millions of individuals now share knowledge and information and communicate easily. Social media serves to fulfill various needs, such as accessing digital content or products (Jaring & Bäck, 2017; Kapoor et al., 2018). This is especially evident in young age groups, where making decisions about their interests and needs helps boost their self-confidence, fostering positive self-esteem. Furthermore, social networking sites act as online platforms for individuals to forge social bonds or relationships with peers who share common professional or personal interests, activities, fields, or real-life connections (Farzin et al., 2022). Consumer behavior and intention in the traditional mode were deemed acceptable and aligned with Herbert Simon's work on decision-making (Simon, 1960). The classical model simplified complex frameworks by focusing on the five decision stages of problem identification, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. This model, often referred to as the EKB or EBM model, has been widely recognized and utilized as a standard framework in con-

sumer behavior research (Karimi et al., 2015).

However, in recent decades, particularly in the 21st century, the emergence of new media, especially social media, has led to significant changes and advancements in consumer decision-making behavior. These changes are attributed to the influence of new social media models on customer preferences and choices. Numerous authors have conducted research on the impact of social media on consumer behavior, including intentions and satisfaction. These studies typically agree that consumers are influenced by social networks as they provide immediate access to information and supply the goods and services they need, especially within the statistical population during the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that social media can influence consumers' intentions and aid them in deciding what, when, and where to make purchases or explore new products and brands. Online consumer surveys (Yayli & Bayram, 2012) have revealed that specific causal factors significantly impact consumers' product choices and purchasing behavior. The literature on this topic universally demonstrates the substantial impact of new media models on consumers' intentions in the global community. Nevertheless, authors have observed variations in the intensity, significance, state, and quality of this impact on consumer decision-making across different societies. Therefore, to obtain more accurate conclusions from the findings, it is advisable to examine the results of relevant research conducted in the target society (Iran) and other societies.

In one study conducted by Farhangi et al. (2014), researchers analyzed the impact of social media on customers' attitudes toward the brand and purchase intention in Iran Khodro Company. The findings indicated that both traditional advertising and social media had a positive influence on customers' attitudes toward the brand, with social media having a stronger impact. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that customers' attitude

toward the brand influenced their purchase decisions.

Kiran and Shanmugam (2016) investigated the effect of social media on changing customer attitudes toward purchasing cars. The results highlighted the significant impact of five factors: brand awareness, type of social media, social media information, car brand website, and social media effectiveness on consumer attitudes, leading to car purchases. The study also revealed gender differences in attitudes toward searching for car information on social media.

Kudeshia and Kumar (2017) researched the impact of social word-of-mouth advertising through social media on brand attitude and purchase intention of electronic appliances. The study demonstrated that positive word-of-mouth advertising on Facebook significantly influenced customers' attitudes toward the brand and their intention to purchase electronic appliances.

Kumar et al. (2017) examined the synergistic effects of traditional and social media on sales, considering the time-varying effect. The results indicated that the effectiveness of social and traditional media varied over time, and their combined impact was synergistic. The research presented a method that accounted for the time variable, resulting in cost savings and improved accuracy compared to previous models. This research provides managers with valuable insights to understand the synergistic effects of social and traditional media, as well as the importance of considering different time periods for resource allocation in marketing efforts.

Abu-Ghosh et al. (2018) investigated the factors influencing Jordanian consumers' attitudes toward Facebook ads, specifically in the context of tourism. The findings revealed that electronic word-of-mouth marketing and online advertising directly influenced travelers' purchase intention to visit the country. Trust played a mediating role in the model, indicating that online advertising and online communities indirectly affected purchase intention through trust.

METHODOLOGY

The present research is a qualitative study that investigated customers' purchase intention with a focus on social media using the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that employs systematic procedures to inductively generate a model about the phenomenon under study. This approach facilitates the analysis of collected data, transforming them into concepts, categories, and ultimately models (Khodabandeh et al., 2018).

When a researcher requires a theory or a general explanation of a process, they employ fundamental theory. Fundamental conceptualization theory is a research strategy that develops a theory based on the main concepts derived from the data. The primary objective of this theory is to explain a phenomenon by identifying its key elements (concepts, categories, and topics) and organizing the relationships among these elements within the context and process of that phenomenon.

The research population comprised specialists and experts in the field of marketing and sales, each with a minimum of 15 years of experience. A purposive sampling method was used involving the selection of informants based on the topic, problem, and research context. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring a detailed and comprehensive explanation of the target theory (Khodabandeh et al., 2018). The snowball sampling technique was also employed at this stage of the research.

Data were collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews, which were designed based on a review of relevant literature and research background. The validity of the data and findings was confirmed through participant review and review by non-participant experts. Corrections and feedback were incorporated into the final research model. Data analysis involved data collection, classification, coding, and comparison. The analysis entailed examining interview transcripts and individuals' statements, a process known as open coding, which facilitated the identifi-

cation of categories, characteristics, and dimensions. Categories gradually emerged and developed through the coding process, which was conducted systematically and according to established standards. Three coding stages were employed: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

RESULTS

In this research, data were analyzed through the three stages of grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Subsequently, the final model was developed based on these steps.

Open Coding: The results of the surveys and the data analysis of the interviews in the first stage led to the identification of relevant main and sub-categories. In this regard, sub-categories were defined. The researchers made an effort to adhere to the analysis techniques recommended by Strauss and Corbin throughout all analysis stages. At this particular stage, the researchers drew inspiration from the thematic literature and incorporated it into the interviews. Overall, by considering titles with similar content and meaning, and by eliminating frequently listed titles, a total of 49 final open codes were established.

Axial coding: In the axial coding stage, the concepts obtained and extracted from the interviews, along with the input from subject matter experts, were organized based on commonalities or synonyms. Codes that shared conceptual similarities were grouped together into categories that were related to each other around a common axis. This stage, which concluded with the paradigm model, resulted in the formation of the coding paradigm's dimensions across six categories: causal conditions, contextual conditions, interfering conditions, axial phenomenon, strategies, and consequences (Table 1).

Causal conditions: According to the results in Table (1), causal conditions have two categories: media use (9 concepts) and media role (7 concepts).

Contextual conditions: According to the re-

sults in Table 1, the contextual conditions have two categories: sanctions (1 concept) and the existence of differences in media audiences (7 concepts).

Interferer conditions: According to the results in Table 1, the interfering conditions have three categories: socio-economic (2 concepts), organizational (6 concepts), and individual (2 concepts).

Axial phenomenon: According to the results in Table (1), the core phenomenon has two categories: true advertising (3 concepts) and media characteristics (3 concepts).

Strategies: According to the results in Table 1, strategies have two categories: service (2 concepts) and management (8 concepts).

Consequences: According to the results of Table 1, the consequences have two categories: organizational (1 concept) and individual (2 concepts).

Selective coding: After identifying the concepts in the open coding stage and extracting the categories in the axial coding stage, the research progressed to the selective coding stage, which involved theorizing. In this stage, the axial phenomenon was systematically connected to other categories, both main and secondary. The researcher developed a paradigm model, which is depicted in Figure 1, and this model is now ready for testing in the subsequent steps. The model illustrated in Figure 1 represents the relationships among variables that influence the explanation and prediction of social media's impact on brand attitude and customers' purchasing intention. Figure 1 displays a graphical model of customers' purchasing intention, specifically focusing on social media, based on the grounded theory approach.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article presented the findings of a field study conducted to develop a model for measuring customers' purchase intention with a focus on social media using the grounded theory methodology. Social media refers to websites or programs that enable users to create, share, and interact with con-

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Table 1

Open Coding and Categories Related to Each Topic in the Organic Industry

Topic	Categories	Open coding
Causal factors	Use of media	Spending more time with media Pushing and changing the customer's attitude More inclusiveness of the media Attracting the public audience and customers Introducing organic products Increasing social awareness Advertising
	The role of the media	Modeling (behavior-personality) for the audience Changing the attitude of the audience Attracting more and more audience Making it possible to access and attract customers Making it possible to provide correct information to customers Attracting customers' trust Interaction between the company and customers
Phenomenon	True advertising	Graphic designs Soundtrack Attractive color
	Features of the media	More trust of the audience in the media content The main reference for obtaining audience information More specialized content
Consequences	Organizational	Increasing competition between companies providing organic products
	Individual	Purchase intention Increased word-of-mouth advertising
Strategies	Service	Qualitative Quantitative
	Managerial	Encouraging users to advertise the company to others Identifying and using qualified and capable managers Moving towards meritocracy Correcting inefficient administrative bureaucracy Training employees Use of marketing consultants Assessment of customer needs Creation of competitive advantage for customers
Contextual conditions	Sanctions	The part of sanctions that prevent the export of products or the import of required devices
	Existence of differences in media audiences	Differences in audiences in terms of occupation Differences in audiences in terms of age Differences in audiences in terms of occupation, purchasing criteria Income and financial ability Literacy The existence of a behavioral difference in media audiences
Interfering conditions	Economic-social	Competition between companies providing organic products General market structures
	Organizational	Low quality of products High cost of advertising Increasing the volume of non-specialist employees Managerial weakness Type and method of advertising
	Individual	Trust in the media Unsuccessful shopping experience

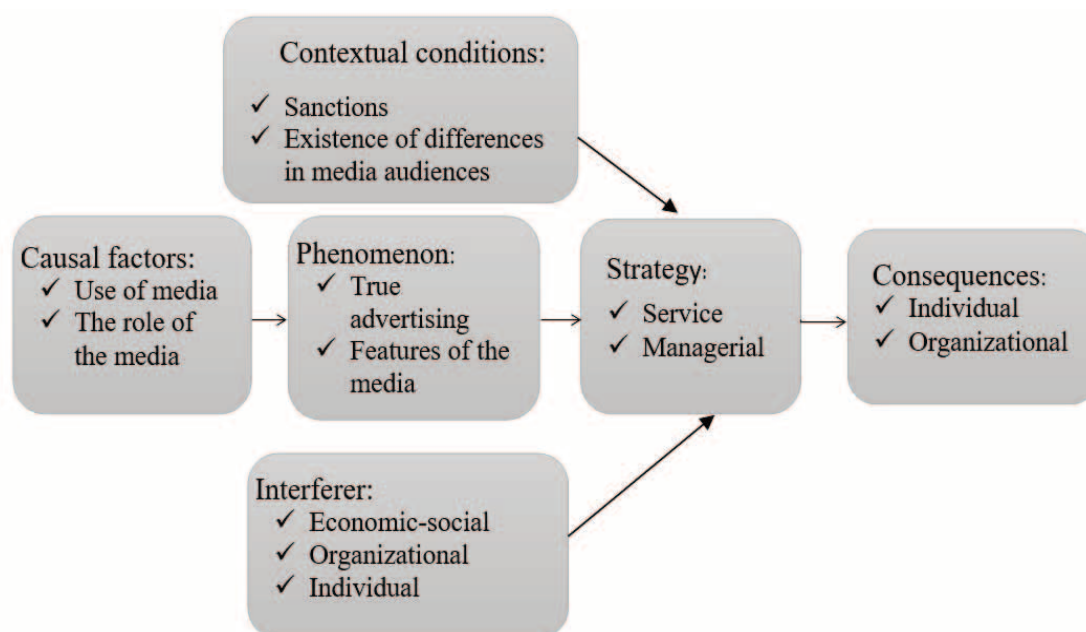


Figure 1. The Model of Customers' Purchase Intention with Emphasis on Social Media Based on Grounded Theory

tent. These platforms allow users to quickly share content through smartphones, tablets, and computers in real time. With approximately 3.5 billion smartphone users worldwide, the use of social media has become an integral part of people's daily lives. These technologies and media platforms are primarily responsible for the rise of user-generated content.

According to the existing research literature, social media has facilitated the creation of various online platforms where individuals can communicate and share thoughts and content with one another. This new media revolution has provided a novel means of obtaining information about products and services. Active members of social media can significantly influence a consumer's opinion and feedback on products and services, both online and offline. Furthermore, social media, where content is predominantly generated through online conversations, empowers consumers to make decisions and shape outcomes. Consumers play a crucial role in either building or undermining a brand's reputation. Consequently, marketers strive to comprehend how consumers utilize social media and how their decision-making

processes are influenced within the network.

Studies have consistently shown that understanding consumers' social media usage and decision-making models can significantly impact marketers' strategies. This research also aimed to explore how the abundance of content and user-generated information can reshape consumer purchasing patterns.

The present study was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory. The effectiveness of traditional and social media advertisements was examined, and based on the findings, a conceptual model was proposed. Data for the research were collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Fifteen specialists and experts with over 15 years of experience in the marketing and sales field participated in the interviews. Ethical considerations were taken into account during the research process. Along with the interview questions, a letter was sent to the participants, signed by the researcher, emphasizing the obligation to maintain the confidentiality of the interview content and the participants' profiles, with a commitment not to publish them.

The interviews were conducted based on predefined indicators, and the focus was put

on the role and each investigated media in customers' attitudes and purchase intentions, as well as the key factors influencing changes in customer behavior. The validity of the data and findings was ensured by being reviewed by the participants and seeking input from external experts. Their comments were incorporated to improve and finalize the research model.

The data analysis was carried out in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding stage, the concepts were identified, and the features and dimensions of each concept were explored. In the axial coding stage, relationships were established between the concepts and categories. The categories included causal conditions, contextual conditions, interfering conditions, axial phenomenon, strategies, and consequences. Finally, during the selective coding stage, the axial phenomenon was systematically linked to other categories (main and secondary), and the categories that required further refinement and development were improved. The grounded theory approach was utilized to draw the final model. Thus, the main research question, "What are the actions, interactions, and consequences of customer engagement, according to experts, in terms of causal factors, contextual conditions, interfering conditions, and the axial category?" has been addressed and answered as follows:

Causal factors: Based on the interviews, the analysis of the relevant literature, and the results of selective coding, causal factors were identified and classified into two dimensions: media usage and media role and position. The dimension of media usage includes factors such as spending more time with the media, influencing and changing customers' attitudes, greater inclusivity of the media platform, attracting a wider audience and customers, introducing organic products, increasing social awareness, and serving as a channel for advertising and communication between the company and customers. The dimension of media role and position within

the company comprises factors such as serving as a model for the audience in terms of behavior and personality, influencing changes in the audience's attitudes, attracting a larger and more diverse audience, enabling access to and attracting customers, providing accurate information to customers, and fostering trust and interaction between the company and its customers.

Contextual conditions: Drawing on the interviews, the analysis of the relevant literature, and the results of selective coding, contextual factors were identified and categorized into two dimensions: sanctions and differences in media audiences. The dimension of sanctions within the company includes those sanctions that hinder product exports or the importation of necessary devices. This dimension highlights the regulatory barriers and restrictions that impact the company's operations. The dimension of differences in media audiences focuses on variations among audiences in terms of occupation, purchasing criteria, income and financial capability, literacy, and behavioral differences. These factors acknowledge the diversity among media audiences and how it influences their preferences and behaviors.

Interfering conditions: In light of the interviews, the analysis of the relevant literature, and the results of selective coding, interfering conditions were classified into three dimensions: socio-economic, organizational, and individual interfering factors. The dimension of socio-economic interfering factors encompasses aspects such as competition between companies offering organic products and the overall market structure. The organizational dimension encompasses factors such as market structures, substandard product quality, high advertising costs, an increase in non-specialized employees, managerial shortcomings, and the type and approach of advertising strategies. The individual dimension included factors such as trust in the media and previous unsatisfactory shopping experiences.

The axial phenomenon: Drawing upon the interviews, the analysis of the relevant liter-

ature, and the results of selective coding, the axial phenomenon was categorized into two dimensions: true advertising and media characteristics. The dimension of true advertising encompasses elements such as graphic designs, soundtracks, and appealing colors that contribute to advertising authenticity and effectiveness. The dimension of media characteristics includes factors like increased audience trust in media content, the media serving as a primary source of information for the audience, and the content being more specialized in nature.

Strategies: Based on the interviews, the review of the specialized texts and research literature, and the results of selective coding, strategies were categorized into two dimensions: service strategies and management strategies. The dimension of service strategies encompasses measures such as enhancing the customer relationship management unit, strengthening the support unit, reducing costs, and acquiring modern equipment to improve service delivery. The dimension of management strategies includes initiatives such as encouraging users to promote the company to others, identifying and utilizing qualified and capable managers, fostering a meritocratic approach, rectifying inefficient administrative bureaucracy, providing employee training, engaging marketing consultants, assessing customer needs, and creating a competitive advantage for customers.

Consequences of customer interaction: Based on the interviews, the analysis of the specialized texts and research literature, and the results of selective coding, consequences were classified into two dimensions: organizational consequences and individual consequences. The dimension of organizational consequences encompasses the intensification of competition between companies offering organic products. The dimension of individual consequences includes the influence on customers' purchase intentions and an increase in word-of-mouth advertising.

In total, the research findings align with the future plans of the target community, encour-

aging managers to implement a practical plan to address criticisms and to enhance and expand their competitive advantage within the industry. In this project, considering the prevailing culture of the main customer base, a combination of both traditional and modern media channels is employed. The project aims to gradually increase the use of standardized social media platforms among various customer segments, particularly among the younger groups. It follows a sequential process wherein the company segments the entire market based on specific criteria. It then selects one or more profitable groups, among other considerations, and subsequently establishes a favorable environment for the product or service within the customers' minds. The key goals of implementing this plan include addressing customer needs and demand more effectively, elevating their purchasing levels, attracting purchasing power through price differentiation, expanding the customer base to include new groups, fostering stable customer relationships, engaging in targeted communication, promoting innovation, and increasing market share.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All the authors have read and agreed with the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have not declared any conflict

of interest.

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