

Behavioral Economics in Online Food Delivery Platforms: Exploring the role of Cognitive Biases and Behavioral Nudges in Increasing Consumer Engagement- A Case Study of Zomato and Swiggy

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ABSTRACT

The rapid digitalization and the growing popularity of e-commerce market have paved the way for the various Online Food Delivery Platforms (OFDP) to come to limelight. With the rising competition specially in the post covid era, marketers and businesses have shifted from a traditional to a more behaviorally induced marketing approach. The motive for this study is to understand the effect of cognitive biases and behavioral nudges in increasing consumer engagement in two of the top-most OFDP namely Zomato and Swiggy in the metropolitan city of Kolkata. The major findings and past literature suggest that various cognitive biases and mental heuristics does play a significant role in determining consumer behaviour and online marketers takes complete advantage of this phenomenon and creates marketing strategies to increase user engagement and sales in the e-commerce platforms like Zomato and Swiggy.

Keywords: Behavioral Economics, Consumers Behaviour, Marketing, Cognitive Bias

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of science and technology, today the internet is readily available and widely accessible by common people. We can get access to all the basic necessities needed to sustain livelihood while enjoying the comforts of our bedroom. This tremendous increase in accessibility has resulted from the rapid growth and growing popularity of the e-commerce market in India. India's e-commerce sector stands at US\$ 74.8 billion in 2022 and is expected to reach US\$ 111.40 billion by 2025 with a CAGR of 19.24% (IBEF, 2022). With rapid economic growth and an increase in the overall purchasing power of individuals, in order to survive in the era of cut-throat competition, e-commerce companies are gradually shifting from traditional strategies towards a more behavioral science induced nudge-marketing strategies to boost consumer engagement and sales over the past years.

Behavioral Economics is a field in Economics which investigates how various aspects like psychological, cognitive, emotional, cultural, and social factors influence individual decision and choice architecture at a micro and as well as at a macro level. 'Nudge Theory' is a concept which has originated from Behavioral Economics. Nudge marketing is the strategy of delivering marketing messages in order to channelize human behavior to a specific desired action by understanding the underlying cognitive biases and heuristics of the consumer.

In this paper, we discuss the various behavioral strategies and nudges that the online food delivery platforms (OFDP) like Zomato and Swiggy use to increase engagement and online purchases and to what extent consumer behavior

gets influenced by it. The OFDP sector has been showing considerable growth in the past decade. The **Indian online food delivery market** reached a value of US\$ 4.35 Billion in 2020 and is expected to grow at a CAGR of 28.9% from 2022 to 2027 (IMARC group, 2020). The onset of covid-19 in 2020 has further aggravated the growth of the OFDP with certain protective health measures. In 2022, Zomato's gross merchandise value (GMV) was recorded to be \$2.72 billion while Swiggy's GMV was recorded to be \$2.3 billion in 2022 (Suresh, 2022). In the past five years, as per the results of a survey on Indian food delivery apps, about 20 percent of respondents ordered food from food delivery apps twice a week and 13 percent ordered almost daily (Rakuten Insights, June 2020). In January 2021, the two of the most popular and competitive food delivery apps namely **Zomato** and **Swiggy** were recorded to have achieved a combined number of orders equal to 1.8 to 2 million per day.

2. BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The goal of consumer behaviour analysis has been to combine behavioural psychology, behavioural economics, and marketing science into a cohesive system that better understands customer behaviour (Foxall, 2004, 2011; Hantula, DiClemente, & Rajala, 2001). Behavioral economics, derived from microeconomic theory asserts that behavioural and psychological factors influence economic decisions made by people and governments (Wilkinson & Klaes, 2012). This sub-area in Economic theory proposes that humans do not maximize but instead 'satisfice' since they lack the knowledge and cognitive abilities needed to maximize or optimize their purchase (Herbert Simon, 1979). The two systems, system 1 and system 2, play a significant role in human decision-making. While System 1 operates automatically and quickly with little to no effort and no awareness of voluntary control, System 2 focuses on mental activities that require effort and complex computations on how the brain stores memories, how our left side of the brain is more creative and articulate, and how our right side is more prone to automatic thought (Kahneman. D, 2011).

Consumer behaviour is the process of interpreting human economic consumption by using behavioural concepts, often learned via experimentation (Foxall, 2001). Many such experimentation has left us with numerous evidence elaborating that human decision are often biased and different from traditional economics (Thaler, 2016). As compared to Neoclassical theories of economics which deal with rationality and utility maximization under perfect information and consistency, Behavioral economics deals with 'bounded rationality' and cognitive limitations. At times of cognitive overload when asked to make decisions from several options, the system one of our brains gets activated, and we have a tendency to adopt mental shortcuts or 'heuristics' to reach at a decision point. (Kahneman. D, 2011). Nudge Marketing, a concept of behavioral economics is a subtle way where a marketer makes use of nudges to influence the consumer's behavior and boost their sales. A Nudge, as we will use the term, is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives (Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R, 2009). Studying these signals or 'nudges' help us understand why certain choices and decisions are made and thus enables the design of choices and choice environments (Kesseli, 2021).

The past two decades have witnessed behavioral changes in the marketing strategies especially in the e-commerce platforms. Consumers have to make many highly complex decisions, often in situations characterized by scarcity of time, knowledge, or negotiation power (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013). Human beings are very vulnerable when under the influence of various visceral drives and if understood and channelized, marketers can take great advantage of this behavior. Upliftment of the various e-commerce platforms by exploiting the various loopholes of human decision making has shown significant results. Some of these includes minimization of clicks and micro-conversions (Alexander, 2006); personalization of information and framing of content to influence consumer behavior (Alexander, 2006; Allagui & Lamoine, 2008; Wan, Menon, & Ramaprasad, 2009); creating visually engaging content (Jiang & Benbasat, 2004), etc. All of the above strategies were made in accordance with certain psychological, behavioral or cognitive aspects. Hence, to better understand the behavior of the market consumers, it thus becomes crucial to understand the psychological behavior or the Cognitive Biases affecting the consumers in various circumstances.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The research objective is to understand and evaluate the potential cognitive biases and heuristics that can influence the behaviour of the consumers while surfing through the OFDP like Zomato and Swiggy. The paper also intends to throw a light on how these biases can be incorporated into marketing strategies in order to boost user engagement, goodwill and sales of Zomato and Swiggy.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is designed keeping in pace with the objective set and to address the research problem. The research is mainly based on past literature on how certain cognitive biases can help increase consumer engagement and nudge them to place orders in Zomato and Swiggy. The study also comprises of a primary survey, conducted in the city of Kolkata with a total sample size of 120 individuals. The survey was conducted through questionnaires comprising majorly multiple-choice questions and Likert scale questions. The households were chosen using Snowball sampling technique. The study was conducted on a sample of interested individuals who had previously ordered food online from either Zomato or Swiggy or from both.

The study is mainly descriptive. Percentage method is used for the analysis of the data. Graphs are made to represent the data and the corresponding interpretation is derived from it.

5. BIASES AND HEURISTICS USED BY OFDP TO BOOST USER ENGAGEMENT.

The term “cognitive bias” was first introduced by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in 1974. The theory underlying it holds that certain cognitive biases in the human mind may cause heuristic thinking, which is based on the principles of limited rationality (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Wilke & Mata, 2012). In other words, it is feasible to influence people's choice architecture and trigger them to take actions that fulfil predetermined goals by giving them certain information in a specific way (Jankus, 2016).

OFDP uses various marketing strategies which are immensely influenced by Behavioral Economics. When consumers start surfing the OFDP, they generally get overwhelmed with the variety of options provided. As a result of cognitive overload, people make use of *heuristics* or mental shortcuts or mental reflexes to reach a decision point. Heuristics are very important in such situations but making use of these mental reflexes often lead to *cognitive biases*. Our focus in this section of the research paper will mainly be on exploring these psychological phenomena and how these impact our behavior when surfing through the various OFDP especially Zomato and Swiggy.

- a) **Availability Heuristic:** As consumers are cognitive misers (Fiske and Taylor, 1991), they often do not process information extensively in an analytical way and instead rely on simple rules to make judgments and decisions, such as the availability and representativeness heuristics (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). In Availability Bias, the decision of an individual depends on easily accessible knowledge rather than examining other possibilities and approaches (Khan, 2017). In other words, Availability heuristic is a mental shortcut that employs system one thinking in decision making process.

Marketers take advantage of this aspect of human behavior by promoting iterating advertisements. The quantity of information provided on a particular product increases the probability that a buyer would purchase it. OFDPs like as Zomato and Swiggy take advantage of availability bias with their extensive social media advertising strategy for increased brand awareness with the help of illustrative and picturesque depictions.

- b) **Status Quo Bias:** Status Quo is a psychological phenomenon where an individual does not want to deviate from the pre-set default and any deviation from the default is considered to be a loss. When confronted with new alternatives, decision makers frequently choose to remain status quo i.e., maintain their previous current or previous decision (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988). This occurs mainly due to commitment bias where people have the tendency of sticking to their default choice and not making any effort to switch or explore other options. This can be due to various cognitive bias like loss aversion i.e., fear of loss exceeds potential gain (Tversky and Kahneman, 1979) or due to Mere-Exposure effect i.e., tendency to prefer things as they are simply because they are familiar (Cherry, 2022).

In the context of OFDP like Zomato and Swiggy, they provide a separate section of “Previously ordered items” and personalization effect with the tag of “Recommended for you” so that consumers can arrive at a conclusion without causing much cognitive effort.

- c) **Bandwagon Effect:** Bandwagon effect or Social Proof is a psychological phenomenon which signifies Herd mentality or following what ‘others’ do without putting much effort in deciding what should be the optimized choice. Social Proof is a mental heuristic which involves system one thinking assisting people in the decision-making process in case

of information overload. It works especially well in uncertain settings especially for clients who are hesitant or indecisive in nature.

Marketers make use of this bias by providing multiple cues like the number of people using or buying the item, displaying reviews and ratings, endorsements and collaborations showing celebrities using the particular product, etc. Zomato provides cues like 'Bestseller' or numerical cues stating '4275+ people have recently placed from here' thus priming and nudging the consumers to make a purchase from a particular restaurant from their website.

- d) **Noble Edge Effect:** When companies show characteristics of being socially responsible, they are awarded with increased respect and a positive brand image. As a result, customers are more satisfied with their decision of purchase and instead reward the company with more purchases or favorable word-of-mouth. This phenomenon is known as Noble Edge Effect. The goodwill or the socially responsible behaviour of a company correlates positively with the consumer perceptions about the company or the brand value, a phenomenon popularly known as Halo Effect (Chernev & Blair, 2015).

This marketing strategy has been used extensively by all the leading companies and organizations over the past including the OFDP like Zomato and Swiggy. Zomato's message of 'climate conscious delivery' and Swiggy's 'sustainable food packaging marketplace' pertaining to the norms of sustainability in turn creating a positive reinforcement in the minds of the consumers thus increasing user engagement and boosting up sales.

- e) **IKEA Effect:** It is a cognitive bias in which customers place a disproportionately high value on things that they contributed to its making in some way. We as human beings have a psychological need to feel competent and a need to feel that our effort was worth it. This can be stemmed down to Effort Justification theory where we tend to put more value to a product which has required more of our physical and emotional effort.

IKEA Effect has been used extensively by marketers and enterprises in the past decade. My Froyoland have this unique concept of making your own ice-cream, the Nike by You feature allows users to create their own footwear virtually, Subway gives the autonomy to users to make their own sandwiches are some of the many examples where IKEA Effect is being used to increase user engagement by associating an emotional connect with the item being purchased. So, in the case of OFDP when a consumer is being actively engaged in the customization of any item, there is a sense of impulse which works to justify their action which drives them or nudges them to complete the purchase. Zomato and Swiggy use this psychological phenomenon to increase retention and boost sales.

- f) **Reciprocity Bias:** Reciprocity is a social norm which stimulates the desire to repay any favors with helpful behavior. Humans are said to have a propensity to anticipate almost equal proportions of giving and receiving (Becker, 1986). This bias is heavily used by marketers and salespeople in order to boost sales and improve brand recognition for the goods and business. The principle of reciprocity in marketing strengthens the bond between the customer and the company thus building a ground for trust and obligation. For instance, a small note from the restaurant's chef or a free surprise cookie with a cup of coffee can enhance the likelihood of a higher rating and, as a result, improve the restaurant's sales.

OFDP like Zomato and Swiggy's marketing strategy such as 'free burger on minimum spending of 300', 'flat Rs. 125 off' or 'free delivery' attracts customers back to these websites with an obligation and a sense of responsibility to actively reciprocate by purchasing from them.

- g) **Eaten-Rosen phenomenon:** Eaten Rosen phenomenon or Rhyme as reason effect is a cognitive bias which increases the likelihood that individuals would trust statements with rhymes over those without. Statements which are rhyming or iterating are often mistaken for increased certainty regarding their authenticity (Meyer, Schvaneveldt, & Ruddy, 1975; Hillinger, 1980; Reber, Winkelman, & Schwarz, 1998; Mc Glone & Tofigbakhsh, 2000). Rhyming or lyrical messages and alerts are also more captivating and receptive, resulting in more emotional investment by the consumers.

OFDP like Zomato uses this strategy extensively in the form of poetry or 'shayari' to nudge consumers to make sales. Two examples of such notification alerts of Zomato are illustrated below.

"Main tenu samjhawan ki..."

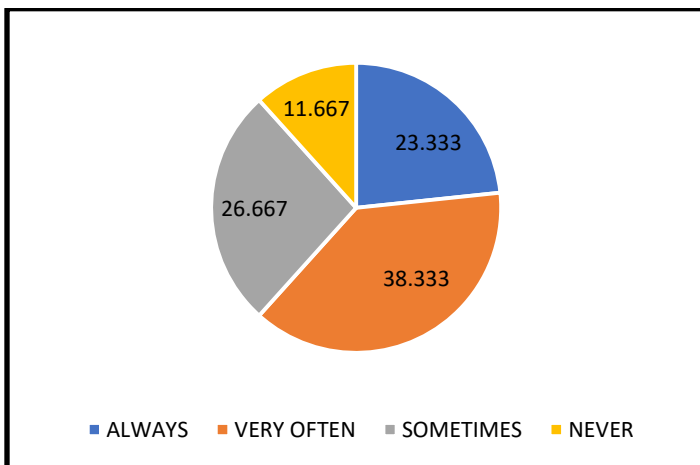
...dal makhani is better dinner than lauki
 Tu kar Jigna tap zara, main lau order tera”
 “Let us raise a toast!
 ...to the people we love the most in the whoooooole world!
 No, it’s not Darla! It’s you Barkha!”

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyze the various behavioral and nudge marketing strategies that two of the topmost OFDP have adopted in order to elevate sales and user engagement. From a total sample size of 120 households, 55.1% of the respondents use Zomato, 40.7% of the respondents use Swiggy and 4.2% of the people prefers to use some other OFDP when ordering food online. The data collected comprises of 59.667% of female and 40.333% of male responses. The study was conducted on 16.67% of the individuals in the age group of 15-20, 59.16% on people between the age bracket of 20-25, 25.67% in the age group of 25-30 and 2.5% of individuals of 30 years and above. The frequency of ordering food online was shown to be 37.5% of respondents ordering food at least once a week and 30.84% ordering food once in a fortnight, 20% ordering food once per month and 11.67% not being a non-frequent user. The survey also revealed that approximately 72% of the respondents spend approximately 100-500 on each order, 22.9% spend approximately 500-1000 on each order and 5.1% respondents spend less than 100 rupees while ordering food online.

Consumer behavior of the frequency of ordering food online given a discount by OFDP like Swiggy and Zomato is presented in figure 1. Discounts are generally associated with positive feelings such as excitement, pleasure, happiness due to the increment in the release of oxytocin. In a study it was found that users of food delivery apps are always seeking for good quality meals which are heavily discounted (Upadhayay et al, 2019). Presence of a discount *primes* the consumer, thus *nudging* them to make the purchase. Another very important psychological pricing technique is *Anchoring*. When an individual becomes anchored on a higher price, the discounted price seems relatively smaller. It can be seen from figure 4 that 26.667% people always order food online and 38.333% people very often order food online in the presence of discounts.

FIGURE 1: - Percentage of respondents ordering food online in presence of discounts

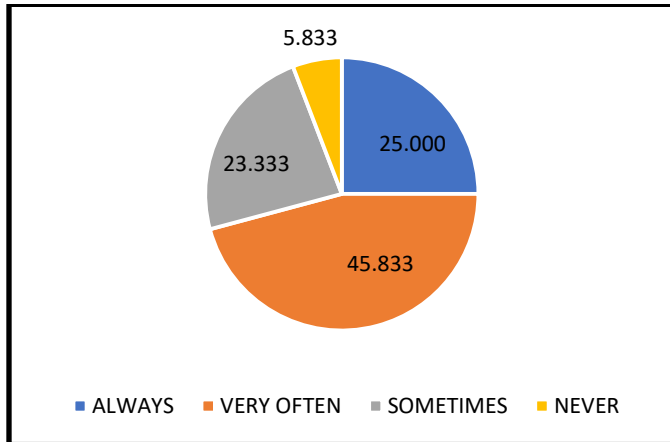


Source: Primary survey

Another very significant psychological factor used by marketers is the *Bandwagon Effect*. Consumers are under the influence of *Zero Risk Bias* or the *Certainty effect* and are always looking for cues to ensure their transaction is optimized. From the survey conducted as shown in figure 2 and 3, it is evident that individuals very often look for cues such as

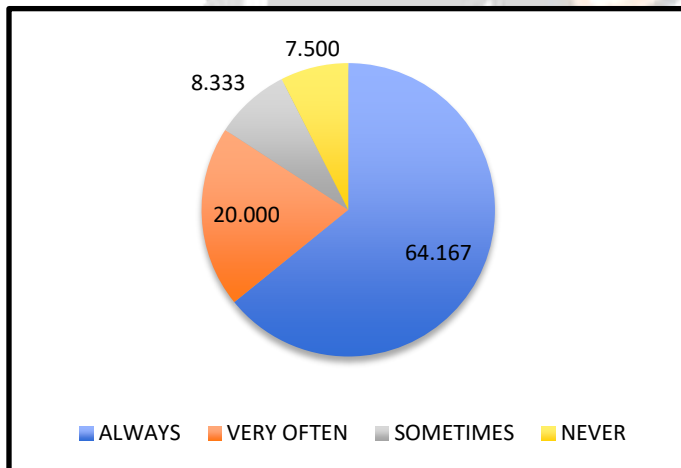
‘Bestseller’ or depend on ‘reviews and ratings’ before making a purchase. These cues also act as a *social proof heuristic* helping us to reach an optimal solution thus avoiding *choice overload*. From Figure 2 and 3 it is evident that 45.833 % and 25% people ‘very often’ and ‘always’ prefers to buy the bestseller item when making a choice of ordering food online while a majority of people (64.167%) always checks reviews and ratings of restaurants before ordering food respectively.

FIGURE 2: - Percentage of respondents buying the food item marked as bestseller



Source: Primary survey

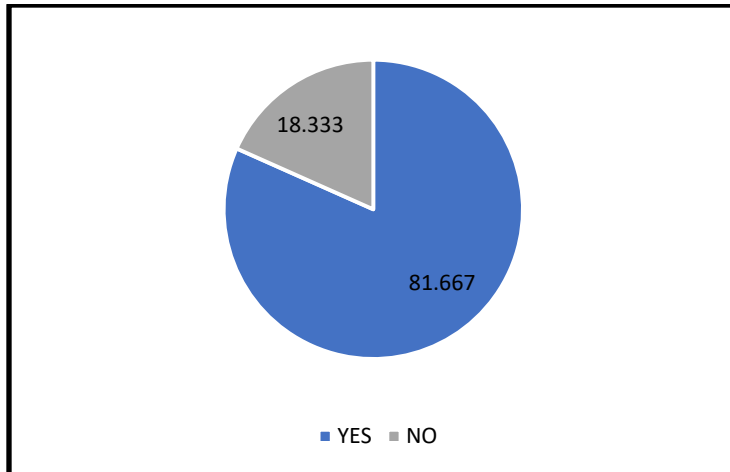
FIGURE 3: - Percentage of respondents seeing reviews and ratings before ordering food online



Source: Primary survey

Human beings are characterized as *‘autonomous’* or *‘independent’* beings and always like to be in power. This fact was further proved in the survey done where a major 81.667% of the respondents stated that they have a higher tendency of completing an order when they can customize their own food items. This is called the *‘IKEA Effect.’* Zomato and Swiggy take full advantage of this psychological phenomenon to boost sales. This phenomenon is presented in figure 4. It is visible that 81.667 % people have a higher satisfaction on customizing their own food.

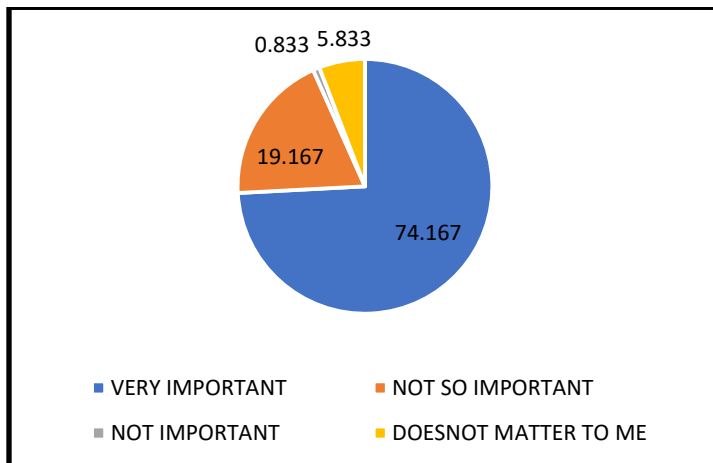
FIGURE 4: - Percentage of respondents having a higher satisfaction on customizing their own food



Source: Primary survey

In the era of climate change and increase in human conscience regarding the same, consumers derive positive reinforcement when they contribute towards sustainability. This is a major overlooked phenomenon by most marketers known as *'Noble Edge Effect'*. Zomato's *'climate conscious delivery'* or Swiggy's *'sustainable food packaging'* strategy not only has positive externalities but also helps to boost sales indirectly. Figure 5 illustrates that 74.167% respondents consider sustainability as an important parameter while ordering food online.

FIGURE 5: - Percentage of respondents taking sustainability as an important factor when ordering food online



Source: Primary survey

Apart from the above marketing strategies also we see that two very important criteria for choosing any restaurant for online food delivery is 'searching and filtering' and ordering from 'known restaurants. When consumers are faced with multiple choices to reach a specific decision point, two very important psychological phenomena come forward. First, the

human brain relies on heuristics and tends to narrow down their choice to avoid *choice overload*. Second, our brain is under the influence of *Status Quo Bias* and *Zero Risk Bias* thus they generally avoid the hustle of choosing from completely new restaurants and tend to stick to their set of known restaurants. Marketers like Zomato and Swiggy exploit these cognitive biases and design their website in a strategic way to boost sales as well as engagement.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study consists of a primary survey based in Kolkata with a small sample size of 120 people. One of the limitations of any primary survey is that it can be difficult to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected. This is because the data collected through primary surveys is often based on the responses of individual participants, who are in turn under the constant influence of cognitive bias and heuristics. Some of the biases associated with any primary survey can be categorized as respondent bias and hot cold response bias.

Respondent Bias: Primary surveys rely on participants to provide accurate and honest responses, which can be difficult to achieve. Participants may not comprehend the questions completely, may not answer truthfully, or may lack the expertise or experience to offer correct replies. This might result in skewed or untrustworthy results.

Hot-Cold Response Bias: Primary surveys are conducted at a specific point in time i.e., it can only provide a snapshot of the research topic at a specific point in time. Participants may be under the influence of certain visceral drives at the moment of the survey thus it's not possible to draw final conclusions from the survey done at a point in time.

In addition to this, primary surveys are time consuming and people generally loses concentration towards the end of the questionnaire. Also, a relatively small sample size of 120 households often raises questions on the reliability and validity of the analysis which can be further dealt with in future studies.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The main objective of the paper was to analyze to what extent the marketers can make use of the various Nudge-marketing strategies (Biases and Heuristics) to impact consumer behavior on OFDP such as Zomato and Swiggy. First, the paper discussed about the potential biases and heuristics that can impact consumer behaviour in various e-platforms. The second section of the study comprises of a primary survey that was conducted among a chosen group of people in a major metropolitan area to demonstrate the effect of different biases on customer engagement in the top two OFDP.

Previous literature as well as the primary survey conducted, concluded that behavioral insights and biases do play an important role in increasing consumer engagement and in boosting up sales. After a thorough evaluation of the collected data, it can be concluded that certain cognitive bias and heuristics such as Availability Heuristic, Bandwagon Effect, Noble Edge Effect, IKEA Effect, Status Quo Bias are some of the very common phenomena that effects the choice architecture of the consumers while surfing through Zomato and Swiggy. The study was mainly concentrated in the city of Kolkata with a modest sample size of 120 households. To obtain more accurate results, similar research can be carried out with a big sample size in other major cities. The study was also concentrated on the two major OFDP, Zomato and Swiggy which can be extended to other e-platform businesses. Consecutive surveys should be conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the data and further investigation can be conducted to better comprehend the nuances of human behaviour and develop more efficient marketing strategies.

Over the last decade, there has been substantial increases in the implementation of behavioural science in different sectors. The use of behavioural science in marketing has allowed companies to better understand consumer behaviour and make more effective marketing decisions. This has resulted in more tailored marketing strategies and a deeper knowledge of client preferences and demands. However, there is still much scope for advancement in this domain. Many marketers continue to rely on traditional marketing strategies and do not fully employ behavioural science insights. More research and data are also required to better understand customer behaviour and build more successful marketing techniques. With technological advancement, the application of behavioural science in marketing is anticipated to become increasingly more significant in the coming years. With the growth of artificial intelligence and machine learning, marketers will have access to even more data and insights about customer behaviour, thus allowing them to design more personalized and effective marketing campaigns.

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