


ORIGINAL ARTICLE**The Effect of Reference Groups on Online Shopping Style with the mediating Role of Trust and Awareness of Sports Products Consumers**Fatemeh Alibolandi¹  Najaf Aghaei²,  Maryam Mokhtari Dinani ^{3*} 

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T**Introduction**

Until a long time ago, people used to go to stores or markets to buy the products they needed and spent some time shopping for the goods they wanted in different stores (Shankar et al., 2021). Today, a newer and more attractive method has entered the world of shopping and selling, which is completely dependent on the Internet and cyberspace, without any physical communication in society. Currently, businesses are moving towards becoming electronic, and e-commerce is taking on a new face every day. One of the emerging aspects in this field is the emergence of online stores (Ahghar Bazargan and Mohammad Shafiee, 2017); because the traditional marketing approach can no longer meet the needs of the Internet age, especially in the field of sports. Understanding the buying style of sports products by online buyers and virtual networks can enable e-commerce companies to better understand the needs of consumers (Lee, 2021). With the passage of time and the emergence of online stores, people were able to shop online, and today people can easily and simply purchase the goods they need without spending time or money (Pei et al., 2020).

Online shopping is a necessity in today's life and most people prefer to easily make their purchases online due to lack of time; but still many customers do not have enough trust in this type of shopping and perhaps prefer in-person shopping more than online shopping. But the question is, how do people trust online stores? Trust in online stores is perhaps the only issue that makes people hesitate in online shopping. Trust is considered a fundamental concept in online shopping for many reasons. Another important element in online shopping is consumer awareness. Therefore, identifying ways to increase consumer trust has long been a concern of commercial companies, and companies have made large investments in identifying ways to increase consumer awareness. (Sabrian, 2022). Therefore, one of the measures that online stores take to eliminate consumer lack of awareness and confidence in online shopping is to pay attention to reference groups. For this reason, a large number of sports companies use the names of sports stars to advertise their products, which shows that the concept of reference groups has advantages for professional marketers as a tool to win over their competitors (Zhou et al., 2020). Reference groups are those who somehow influence the values, beliefs, and behavior of others. The impact of face-to-face presence and interaction is, in some cases, much greater than advertising methods. This is especially true for

the marketing of industrial products and services. Experts, knowledgeable, and knowledgeable people in any society are those whose opinions are accepted by many others. For this reason, they are considered a reference group for some products (Fernandes & Panda, 2019).

Chetioui et al. (2021) conducted a study on “Investigating factors affecting consumer attitudes towards online shopping: the mediating effect of trust”. The results showed that first, comparative advantage, electronic word-of-mouth, and trust significantly affect consumer attitudes towards online shopping. At the same time, trust is influenced by comparative advantage and electronic word-of-mouth. Second, trust mediates the effects of comparative advantage and electronic word-of-mouth on attitudes towards online shopping. Third, multigroup analysis shows that female consumers tend to show a stronger effect of electronic word-of-mouth on trust and attitudes towards online shopping. Qalati et al. (2021) conducted “The Effect of Perceived Service Quality, Website Quality, and Reputation on Purchase Intention: The Mediating and Moderating Role of Trust and Perceived Risk in Online Shopping”. The results indicate the moderating role of perceived risk on trust in online shopping and purchase intention.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of reference groups on online shopping style with the role of mediating trust and awareness of consumers of sports products. The present study is a survey in terms of its applied purpose, descriptive correlation method with structural equation approach, and data collection method. The statistical population of the study was all people who have an official account of the online store Digikala and have purchased sports products from the online store Digikala at least once. Given the uncertainty of the size of the population, 384 people were selected using the Cochran formula, using a purposive and available sampling method.

The tools used in the present study are the following standard questionnaires:

- Standard Reference Group Questionnaire: The Reference Group Influence on Product Purchase Questionnaire was designed by Park & Lessig (1977) and consists of 14 items and 3 subscales of informational influence, usefulness, and value, which are used to measure the influence of the reference group on product purchase. The reliability of the questionnaire was reported by Park et al. with Cronbach's alpha method as above 70%, and the validity of this scale in the source was reported as desirable.
- Standard Online Shopping Questionnaire: The online shopping questionnaire was developed by Borjian (2013) and was designed to measure online customer purchasing behaviors. This questionnaire has 13 questions and 2 components and evaluates customers' online shopping based on a 5-point Likert scale with questions such as (Are you familiar with the process of purchasing products online?).
- Standard Customer Trust Questionnaire in Online Shopping: This questionnaire was designed and validated by Chiu et al. (2012) and includes 4 closed-ended response items based on a 5-point Likert scale. This questionnaire was validated in Iran by Karami (2015).
- Consumer Awareness Questionnaire: The consumer awareness questionnaire was designed and validated by Hamburg et al. (2010). This questionnaire includes 5 closed-ended response items based on a 5-point Likert scale and its validity and reliability were validated in 2019.

To conduct the research, first, in cooperation with Digikala Company, a complete and comprehensive list of all people who had an official Digikala online store account and had purchased sports products from Digi-Kala online store at least once was provided to the researcher, along with their contact numbers and emails. Then, based on the aforementioned list and with the consent of the people and through the Cochran formula, 384 questionnaires were provided to the people through a purposeful sampling method and were available electronically. In this way, the researcher and colleagues provided the link to the research questionnaires virtually (on the website <https://avalform.com>) to the people via email and Eitaa,

WhatsApp and Telegram software. After completing the questionnaires, they were collected and analyzed.

Descriptive statistics methods (frequency calculation, percentage), confirmatory factor analysis tests and structural equation modeling were used to analyze the data. In addition, SPSS version 26 software was used to test all hypotheses at a significance level of $\alpha=0.05$, and Smart PLS version 3 software was used for structural equation modeling.

Findings

The results of path analysis of structural equations showed that reference groups on online shopping style with path coefficient of 0.274 and T value of 3.684, reference groups on online shopping style trust with path coefficient of 0.552 and T value of 8.046, groups Reference on the awareness of online shopping style with a path coefficient of 0.488 and T value of 7.646, consumers' trust in online shopping style with a path coefficient of 0.367 and a T value of 3.634 and consumer awareness of online shopping style with a path coefficient of 358 0.0 and T value 3.771 has had a positive and significant effect. Also, the results showed that the research model has a good fit.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results of the research, based on the influence of reference groups on the online shopping style of consumers of Digikala sports products, it is necessary for the Digikala online store to pay attention to the factors and paths that affect customer purchasing behavior in its marketing and customer-oriented strategy. Also, according to the results of the research, based on the positive influence of reference groups on the online shopping trust of consumers of Digikala sports products, it is suggested that Digikala company be more honest with its customers so that this honesty becomes self-promotion for profitability and more product sales. Also, providing high-quality goods and creating secure portals for payment and entering customer information are effective in building trust. It is better for Digikala to inform customers about the purposes for which the personal information entered, such as their email and contact number, is used. According to the research results, based on the positive impact of reference groups on the awareness of online shopping style of consumers of Digikala sports products, it is suggested that Digikala Company pay attention to increasing the awareness and familiarity of its customers towards the benefits of online shopping. Based on the results, it is suggested that Digikala sports store in its marketing and customer orientation strategy should pay attention to the factors and paths affecting the customer's buying behavior.

KEY WORDS

Reference Groups, Online Shopping, Trust Consumers, Awareness Consumers, Sports.

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