The effects of digital marketing communication on consumer buyer behaviour in the real estate sector

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Digital Marketing, Communication, Social Media, Buyer Behaviour, Real Estate.

Abstract
In recent years, digital marketing communication has emerged as a powerful tool for influencing consumer behavior across various industries, including the real estate sector. This study aims to investigate the effects of digital marketing communication on consumer buyer behavior within the context of the real estate industry.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather data from real estate consumers and industry professionals. The quantitative phase involves administering structured questionnaires to a sample of real estate consumers to assess their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward digital marketing communication channels, such as social media, websites, email marketing, and online advertising. The qualitative phase involves conducting in-depth interviews with real estate industry professionals to gain insights into their strategies, challenges, and best practices in leveraging digital marketing communication to influence consumer buyer behavior.

The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights into the impact of digital marketing communication on various stages of the real estate buying process, including information search, decision-making, and post-purchase evaluation. Additionally, the study aims to identify key factors that influence consumer engagement with digital marketing content and channels, as well as the role of trust, credibility, and authenticity in shaping consumer perceptions and preferences in the real estate sector. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on digital marketing communication and consumer behavior in the real estate industry, informing practitioners and policymakers about effective strategies for leveraging digital channels to attract, engage, and convert prospective buyers in an increasingly competitive marketplace. These are the findings of the study. The study realised that the factors that contribute to consumer engagement with digital marketing content and channels were social media (Facebook and Instagram). Secondly, the study shows that social media has a positive and significant relationship with consumer buying behavior. Lastly, the study revealed that consumers perceive digital marketing-related content as high when it is trustworthy.

Introduction

The real estate sector in Ghana has experienced significant growth and transformation in recent years, driven by factors such as urbanization, population growth, and increasing demand for housing and commercial properties (Gillespie, 2020). Besides, this growth, digital technologies have revolutionized how real estate companies market their properties and engage with potential buyers. In Ghana, as in many other countries, consumer behavior in the real estate sector has evolved with digitalization. Buyers are more informed and empowered, using digital channels such as social media, property websites, and other online platforms to compare properties, prices, and locations before making decisions (Tsakiridou & Karanikolas, 2019). The availability of online reviews, ratings, and testimonials also influences buyer perceptions and trust. Digital marketing communication plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior. Effective digital strategies can attract, engage, and convert potential buyers by providing relevant information, interactive content, and timely responses (Lopes & Casais, 2022). Therefore, understanding the factors that drive these digital interactions and how they influence buyer decisions is crucial for developing successful marketing campaigns in the real estate market in Ghana, necessitating the need for this study.

Literature review

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has revolutionized marketing practices across various industries, including the real estate sector (Starr, Saginor, & Worzala, 2021). In recent years, real estate companies worldwide have increasingly turned to digital marketing channels such as social media, websites, email marketing, virtual tours, and online advertising to reach and engage with their target audience (Malesev & Cherry, 2021). However, while the adoption of digital marketing in the real estate sector has become widespread, empirical research on consumer engagement with digital marketing content and channels, particularly within the Ghanaian context, remains limited.

Theoretical Framework

This section presents the different theories concerning our topic that will be considered in this study. Four main theories are considered in this section namely the Consumer Engagement Theory, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Social Identity Theory, and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). By exploring the interplay between these theories, we seek to understand how digital marketing communication strategies can influence the buying behavior of consumers in the residential real estate sector in Ghana.

Consumer Engagement Theory

Consumer engagement theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how individuals interact with brands and marketing content in digital environments (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). According to this theory, consumer engagement encompasses a spectrum of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that occur when individuals interact with marketing stimuli (Naqvi, Jiang, & Naqvi, 2021). This framework posits that engagement is a multidimensional construct influenced by various factors, including the quality of content, interactivity of channels, and perceived value of interactions. In the context of the real estate sector, consumer engagement theory offers valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying consumer interactions with digital marketing content and channels, guiding the analysis of factors shaping engagement outcomes (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are primary determinants of users' intentions to adopt and engage with technology (Davis, 1989). In the context of digital marketing in the real estate sector, TAM provides a lens through which to examine consumers' perceptions of digital platforms and content. By assessing consumers' perceptions of the utility and usability of digital marketing channels, real estate companies can better understand the factors driving consumer engagement and inform the design of effective marketing strategies (Ullah, Sepasgozar, Shirowzhan, & Davis, 2021).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory posits that individuals' self-concept is shaped by their membership in social groups and that they strive to maintain a positive social identity by conforming to group norms and values (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Within the real estate sector, consumers may be more likely to engage with digital marketing efforts that resonate with their cultural values, community affiliations, or aspirational identities. Understanding the role of social identity in shaping consumer engagement can inform real estate marketers' efforts to create targeted and culturally relevant digital content (Demangeot et al., 2019).

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposes two distinct routes through which individuals process persuasive messages: the central route, which involves careful consideration of message content and argument quality, and the peripheral route, which relies on cues such as source attractiveness or message length (Alsheikh, Abd Aziz, & Alsheikh, 2021). In the context of digital marketing, the ELM framework offers insights into how consumers engage with marketing content and channels based on their level of cognitive elaboration and motivation. Real estate marketers can leverage this framework to design persuasive digital marketing campaigns that appeal to consumers' cognitive processing styles and decision-making heuristics (Vasudevan & Peter Kumar, 2019).

Conceptual framework

Based on the reviewed theories, we propose the following relationships in our conceptual framework.

Content Quality

How successfully your material accomplishes its aim or goals is a measure of its quality. It speaks to the breadth of knowledge and understanding that may be found in a piece of text. Formatting, readability, and grammatical accuracy are all aspects of content quality that extend beyond information (Strimling, 2019). How successfully your material engages your audience, generates traffic, ranks in search results, and converts users are more indicators of content quality. It is difficult to draw in the proper customers to your website and company. It's much more difficult to interact with them and make them perceive your product as the ideal solution for their needs. It is almost impossible without high-quality material. However, your audience is more likely to interact with you and make a purchase if they believe your material is worthwhile.

Platform Usability

The ease of use of a web page or user interface is known as usability, and it is a quality attribute (Akgül, 2021). The focus is mostly on usability and design. One of the areas of Internet marketing is website usability. It is recommended that website proprietors manage their website's usability and make continuous improvements. Visitors are likely to depart a website fast if it is not created with ease of use in mind. A better search tool can assist a user in making a purchase rather than exit the page.

Social Proof (Reviews)

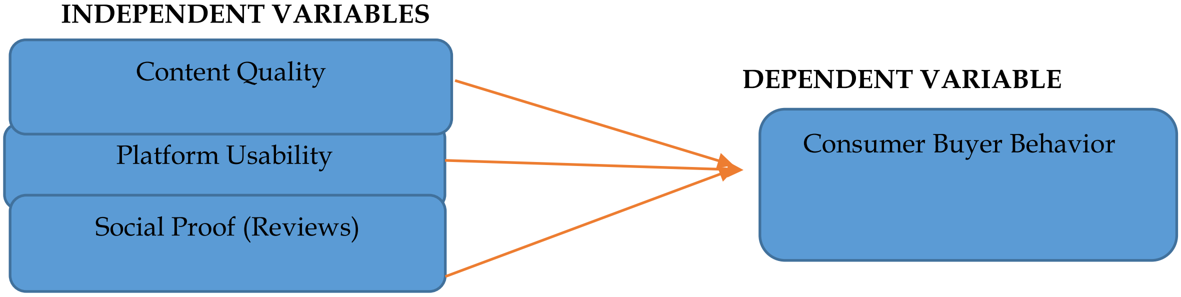
Because it fosters trust with potential clients, social proof is an essential component of digital marketing. Psychologists claim that when people realize that people just like them are already using or recommending a product or service, trust is increased. Social proof in digital marketing may be found in a variety of places, such as influencer endorsements, reviews, ratings, and customer testimonies (Fennis & Stroebe, 2020). Businesses may boost client trust, improve conversions, and eventually succeed with digital marketing by implementing social proof into their marketing plans. Businesses of all sizes compete for customers' attention in the fiercely competitive digital space. Winning over potential consumers' trust is essential to a brand's success in digital marketing in this fiercely competitive environment.

Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior refers to the actions, decisions, and patterns of behavior exhibited by individuals or groups when purchasing, using, or evaluating products and services. Understanding consumer behavior involves analyzing factors such as motivations, preferences, attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making processes that influence purchasing choices (Sundararaj & Rejeesh, 2021).

Fig 2.1: Digital Communication Strategies

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES



H1: content quality has a positive influence on consumer behavior in the real estate industry
H2: Platform usability by the consumer has a positive influence on consumer behavior in the real estate industry
H3: Social Proof (reviews) by the consumers positively influences consumer behavior in the real estate industry.

Methodology

Exploratory research design is a methodological approach used to investigate an area where there is limited knowledge or understanding (Swedberg, 2020). This type of research is flexible, open-ended, and aimed at gaining insights and discovering new ideas. Exploratory research often employs qualitative methods such as interviews, and observations. The research begins with administering questionnaires to recent real estate buyers to gather insights on their perceptions and experiences with digital marketing, and how it influenced their purchase decisions. Further, In-Depth Interviews with real estate professionals, digital marketing experts, and consumers to explore their views on effective digital marketing strategies. The selected population directly aligns with the research objectives, focusing on consumers in the real estate sector who are influenced by digital marketing. A sample size of 100 is practical for data collection and analysis, providing sufficient data to draw meaningful conclusions without being overwhelming. Correlation analysis is used to examine the strength and direction of relationships between the variables. Regression analysis is also utilized to model and analyze the relationship between one or more independent variables and a dependent variable. Multiple regression analysis will be conducted to identify the predictive factors influencing consumer buyer behavior in the real estate sector, considering various digital marketing communication channels and content attributes as independent variables (Low, Ullah, Shirowzhan, Sepasgozar, & Lin Lee, 2020). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is employed to compare means across multiple groups and determine whether there are statistically significant differences in consumer buyer behavior outcomes based on different levels of digital marketing communication exposure or engagement. ANOVA helps assess the impact of digital marketing communication strategies on consumer behavior outcomes while controlling for potential confounding variables (TADELE, 2019).

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software version 28 is used for data entry, management, and conducting statistical tests. SPSS is chosen for its user-friendly interface and robust analytical capabilities (Mehmetoglu, 2021).

Data analysis and discussion

Table-1 Demographics of Respondents

Gender

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	74	74.0
	Female	26	26.0
	Total	100	100.0

Age

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	18-24	15	15.0
	25-34	54	54.0
	35-44	16	16.0
	45-54	13	13.0
	55-64	2	2.0
	Total	100	100.0

Marital Status

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Single	73	73.0
	Married	25	25.0

	Divorced	2	2.0
	Total	100	100.0

Employment Status

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Employed	56	56.0
	Self employed	30	30.0
	Unemployed	4	4.0
	Student	9	9.0
	Retired	1	1.0
	Total	100	100.0

Education Level

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Secondary Education	5	5.0
	Diploma/Certificate	8	8.0
	Bachelor's degree	49	49.0
	Master's degree	35	35.0
	Doctorate degree	3	3.0
	Total	100	100.0

Source: Field Work (2024)

The distribution in Table 4.1 shows the demographics of the respondents. It shows that regarding the respondents, 74% are males and 26% are females. Considering the age distribution of the respondents, it is shown in Table 4.1 that out of the 100 respondents, the age group 18-24 accounts for 15% of the population, 25-34 accounts for 54% of the population, 35-44 represents 16%, 13% are in the age group of 45-54 and 2% of the individuals are in the age-group of 55-64years. Also, it is seen that out of the 100 individuals, 73% are single and 25% are married whereas 2% are divorced. Moreover, the majority of individuals who partook in this study were employed. Accordingly, 56% of the respondents were employed, 30% were self-employed, whereas 4%, 9%, and 1% were unemployed, students and retired respectively. Finally, close to half of the population had bachelor's degrees. From the table, it shows that 49% of the individuals had bachelor's degrees, 8% had diplomas, 35% had their master's degrees, 3% had doctorate degrees and 5% had secondary education.

Table 2 How often do you use the following digital platforms to search for real estate properties?

Platform	Never Freq (%)	Rarely Freq (%)	Sometimes Freq (%)	Often Freq (%)	Always Freq (%)	TOTAL
Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram)	5 (5%)	5 (5%)	27 (27%)	18 (18%)	45 (45%)	100
Property Websites (Realtor.com, Meqasa.com)	16 (16%)	19 (19%)	49 (49%)	13 (13%)	3(3%)	100
Email Newsletters	10 (10%)	16 (16%)	30 (30%)	11 (11%)	33 (33%)	100
Mobile Apps (Jiji.com)	6 (6%)	7 (7%)	55(55%)	19 (19%)	13 (13%)	100

Source: Field Work (2024)

Regarding digital platforms, Table 4.2 shows the usage patterns of the respondents. This suggests that social media such as Facebook and Instagram have high usage; 45% of respondents note that they use it always, while 27% use it sometimes and 18% often; just 10% of them use it rarely or never. Nevertheless, Property websites, such as Realtor.com and Meqasa.com, are less frequently accessed, as 49% of respondents use them sometimes, 13% often, and a mere 3% always, while 35% rarely or never visit these sites. Email newsletters are the most evenly balanced in terms of engagement: 33% always read; 30%, sometimes; 11%, often; and 26%, rarely or never. Additionally, mobile application, such as Jiji.com, is used mostly sometimes by 55%, 19% often, and 13% always, while 13% of the respondents use it rarely or never. These results indicate that social media is most frequently accessed and the property websites are the least being visited by the respondents.

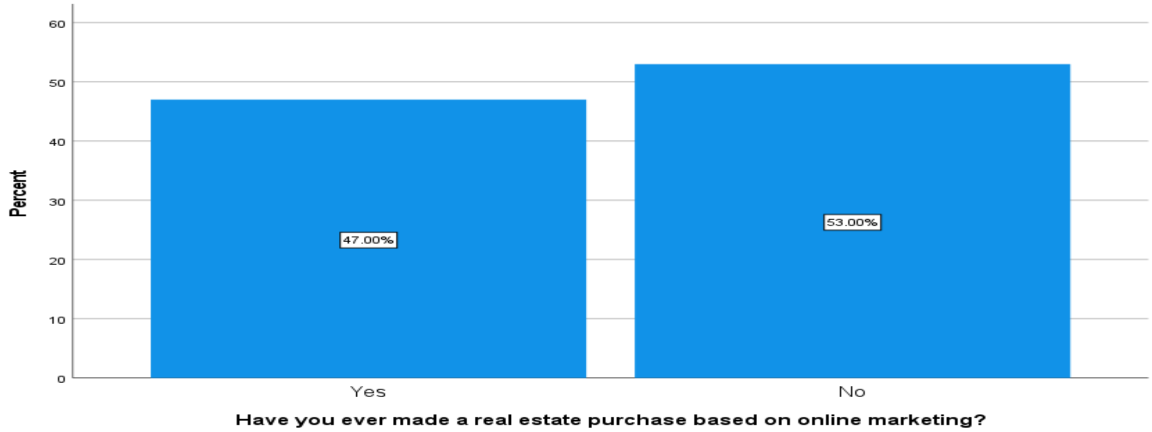
Table 3 How important are the following factors in contributing to your engagement with digital marketing content for real estate?

Factor	Not Important Freq (%)	Moderately Important Freq (%)	Very Important Freq (%)	Extremely Important Freq (%)	TOTAL
Content Quality (e.g., high-resolution images, detailed descriptions)	1 (1%)	13 (13%)	39 (39%)	47 (47%)	100
Platform Usability (e.g., ease of navigation, search functionality)	1 (1%)	12 (12%)	43 (43%)	44 (44%)	100
Social Proof (e.g., reviews, ratings, testimonials)	3 (3%)	18 (18%)	34 (34%)	45 (45%)	100
Personalization of marketing messages	8 (8%)	17 (17%)	31 (31%)	44 (44%)	100
Relevance of content	3 (3%)	8 (8%)	44 (44%)	45 (45%)	100

Source: Field Work (2024)

The importance of different factors in user engagement was assessed, which reflected into quite distinct patterns of prioritization. Content features, such as high-resolution images and detailed descriptions, were by the majority of the respondents which is 45%, as extremely important. About 39% consider it very important, 13% as moderately important, while only 1 percent view it as not important. Moreover, usability of the platform, stood at 44% extremely important and 43% very important, with 12% considering it moderately important and 1% not important. Social proof, which basically means reviews, ratings, and testimonials, followed next: 45% believed it extremely important and 34% very important, with 18% giving importance to that feature moderately, while 3% did not find the feature important. Considering the personalization of marketing messages, the majority of respondents representing 44% of the population rated it as extremely important whereas 31% of the respondents rated it as very important. Only 17% and 3% respectively rated it as moderately important and not important respectively. Finally, the relevance of content came in at extremely important for 45% of the respondents, very important for 44%, moderately important for 8%, and not important for 3%. This signifies that factors such as content quality, platform usability, social proof, and relevance of content are important factors in contributing to the engagement with digital marketing content for real estate.

Figure 1 Have you ever made a real estate purchase based on online marketing?



Source: Field Work (2024)

The results from Figure 4.1 reveal that the majority of the respondents affirm that they had not made a purchase of real estate based on online marketing. Accordingly, 53% of the respondents said no, and 45% of the respondents affirmed yes.

Table 4 Model Summary

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.687[a]	.471	.449	.66836

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	37.441	4	9.360	20.954	.000[b]
	Residual	41.990	94	.447		
	Total	79.431	98			

a. Ddependent Vartable: Consumer_BuyingBehaviour

b. Predictors: (Constant), Mobile Apps (Jiji.com), Email Newsletters, Property Websites (Realtor.com, Meqasa.com), Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram)

From Table 4.4 the regression analysis obtained an R^2 of 0.471 which signifies that changes in the independent variables are causing 47.1% of the variation in customer buying behavior. Also, the model was seen to be significant with a F-test of 20.954 and a p-value < 0.01.

Table 5 Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.109	.319		6.620	.000
	Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram)	.458	.068	.600	6.779	.000
	Property Websites (Realtor.com, Meqasa.com)	-.021	.076	-.024	-.281	.779

	Email Newsletters	.108	.061	.164	1.771	.080
	Mobile Apps (Jiji.com)	-.013	.072	-.014	-.182	.856

a. Dependent Variable: Consumer Buying Behaviour

Source: Field Work (2024)

Considering the coefficients, it reveals that social media such as Facebook and Instagram has a positive and significant influence on consumer buying behavior with a p-value < 0.01. This implies that an increase in social media channels by 1 increases consumer buying behavior by 0.458. This means that engagement increases on social media platforms which leads to increased visibility and a higher chance of purchasing activity. However, property websites didn't have a significant influence on consumer buying behaviour. This recorded a p-value of 0.779 > 0.05. Similarly, mobile apps (Jiji.com) also recorded an insignificant relationship with consumer buying behaviour with a p-value of 0.856 > 0.05. Finally, email newsletters as a channel had a positive and significant relationship with consumer buying behaviour at a p-value of 0.080 < 0.10. This infers that an increase in email newsletters influences consumer buying behaviour by 0.108. As such the frequency of email newsletters, and the quality of messages delivered through emails increases consumer buying behaviour.

Table 6 How Trustworthy and credible do you find online real estate marketing information in Ghana?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Untrustworthy	7	7.0	7.0	7.0
	Neutral	66	66.0	66.0	73.0
	Trustworthy	22	22.0	22.0	95.0
	Very trustworthy	5	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Study (2024)

Responses to the above questions indicated that the majority took a neutral position whereby they neither trusted nor distrusted the information. A good number of 22% described this information as trustworthy while only 5% considered it very much trustworthy. Conversely, 7 percent believed information published pertaining to real estate marketing was untrustworthy. These findings support that trustworthiness is an important feature in engaging consumers. 66% of consumers taking a neutral stand reflects that there is a scope for better engagement if the credibility of digital real estate content is improved. The building of trust through transparency, accuracy, and dependability of information would therefore result in more positive consumer interactions with the digital marketing channels of the real estate sector.

Discussion

The study shows that the factors that contributed to consumer engagement with digital marketing content and channels were social media (Facebook and Instagram). This was one of the digital platforms contributing to user engagement. Nevertheless, the study found that content quality, platform usability, social proof, personalization of marketing messages, and relevance of content were additional factors contributing the improved engagement on digital marketing platforms. This agrees with the earlier work of (Bag et al., 2022), which also pinpointed social media in the importance of showcasing properties and brand awareness. Visual aspects from, Social media, such as interactivity through comments and direct messages, evoke a sense of proximity and personal touch that is quite appealing to the consumers.

It further aligns with the study (Yoong & Lian, 2019), which established that relevant content with high quality increases consumer engagement, especially within the real estate industry, where most purchasing decisions are usually quite visual and detailed. Various factors are crucial, the ease with which one navigates and uses digital platforms keeps people's engagement going. (Prastiawan, Aisjah, & Rofiaty, 2021) also found that perceived usefulness and ease of use are strong antecedents of the intention to use digital platforms, in the context of mobile applications. (Licsandru & Cui, 2019) proved it, showing that only localized and culturally sensitive marketing strategies are able to effectively target diverse consumer cohorts.

Also, the study found that social media has a positive and significant relationship with consumer buying behaviour (β= 0.458 p= 0.000). Moreover, property websites, email newsletters, and mobile apps had no relationship with consumer buying behaviour. This corroborates with the findings of (Wanjiru, 2019), who established a positive influence of social media marketing on customer retention within the Ghana real estate sector. Their study projected that active social media engagement allows customers to be more satisfied and develop more loyalty, which may subsequently increase business in the real estate sector. Similarly, this research indicates that buyers more often than not interact with real estate-related content on social media; thus, these platforms are very important when it comes to driving decisions concerning purchases within real estate. Finally, the study found that consumers perceive digital marketing-related content as high when it is trustworthy. This result is consistent with the results of (Khwaja, Mahmood, & Zaman, 2020) who concluded that trustworthiness is an important factor in how consumers perceive digital marketing communications.

Conclusion

The study employed a quantitative research approach and collected data from 100 homeowners as such regression analysis was employed in addition to descriptive statistics. The findings of the study are summarized below based on objectives.

The study shows that factors that contribute to consumer engagement with digital marketing channels were social with about 45% of the population using them always and 18% using them often. Other channels that contribute to consumer engagement were email newsletters 33% and mobile apps 33%. Additionally, the study found that content quality 86%, platform usability 87%, social proof 79%, and relevance of content 89% were important factors that contributed to consumer engagement with digital marketing content.

The study found that 53% of the homeowners had never made a real estate purchase using social media. The study found that only social media had a positive relationship with consumer buying decisions β= 0.458 p= 0.000. However, other channels such as property websites, email newsletters, and mobile applications had no relationship with consumer buying decisions with p-values > 0.05. The regression model was statistically significant with a p-value of 0.000 and an F stat of 20.954. Besides the R^2 of the regression model was 47.1%. The study also shows that 27% of homeowners perceive digital marketing communications as trustworthy and 66% of them with a neutral viewpoint. Also, 7% of homeowners perceive digital marketing communications as untrustworthy.

The study concluded that social media especially Facebook and Instagram were more influential in consumer engagement and purchasing behavior. Therefore, it is recommended that social media should be one of the main channels of any real estate firm in regard to digital marketing.

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