

Exploring multichannel shopping environment in Oman

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ABSTRACT

The multichannel shopping is gaining strength in different parts of world and even companies are acknowledging this fact and trying to reach consumers through multiple channels but in spite of high internet penetration in Oman, the newly emerging e-commerce channel in Oman accounts to only 1% of total sales and it is still in a early stage where as the global e-commerce market will be around US\$ 2 trillion by 2020 and have a share of 7.8% of all sales. In developed economies, e-commerce share ranges from 45-80%.

This study which is first of its kind in the context of Oman will try to identify factors why multi channel shopping is not growing rapidly in Oman in spite of huge market potential and adoption of digital technology and it will also try to identify catalysts for the strong growth of multichannel shopping in this region. This study will be beneficial for the regional players & international players especially in e-commerce.

The scope encapsulates the current level of consumer awareness and information about different channels of shopping present in Omani consumers with respect to different products and services offered by different companies. The trend of multi channel shopping is present in Omani consumers but it is very limited in percentage terms. The various factors responsible for consumer awareness are studied with the equal focus on factors responsible for multi channel shopping. The study also takes into account how informed or aware consumer take advantage of multi channel shopping environment.

1. Introduction

This is the era of rapid changing life style, in the past consumer use to visit tradition market and purchase goods and services for the daily needs. With a fast development in technology along with e-commerce, e-marketing the theory of multi-channel shopping is emerging. At the same time consumer can get more awareness of different products and services through this advance technology. Customers always occupy a supreme place in every business, in the current world consumer can buy any product through different multi-channels such as Shopping Malls, Television channel, online shopping etc. with complete awareness about the product. Consumer awareness was coined by the western world in 1960's. Modern business is a significant part of current day culture. Each business has a socio-economic force on the community and has to bring the product and services and the standard of living as per the aspirations of the people. It has an immense social accountability towards the well being of society. Therefore customer is a key component of society and business has a responsibility to him. But, when the produce is short in the supply producers are charge high price and consumers have no alternative for other than to purchase what is obtainable. Therefore, consumer is to be protected from the unsafe products, poor quality of the product and services, high prices, unfair trade practices and false advertisements. Therefore, it is essential for an awareness to prevail amongst the consumer to defend them from corrupt trade practices and to give them the idea of value of money spent by them.

2. Multi Channel Shopping

With multi channels consumers will have various preferences with regards to where they acquire their products, some consumer always prefer to view product in the retail store prior to they make a purchase. Other might browse to the product on application and take a decision. Yet some might view an advertisement and decide to purchase product. And there are few other customer who decided to acquire the product at an exhibition.

In multichannel shopping environment consumers can deal with a solo organization to search for information, buy goods, and return goods through one or more of the following channels: brick and mortar retail stores, telephone sales, salespersons, mail-order catalogs, and online Web sites. Both customer-side and supplier-side rationales explain the current trend toward multichannel integration. Organizations are moving towards multiple channel integration (sawhney, 2001) this trend is widespread, on both sides of such industry segment as retail, banking, travel, computer software, hardware and manufacturing. Consumer can deal with a single organization to search for information, purchase product and return product. Providing multichannel facilities for shopping can be measured as a strategy for retaining the customers who value are convenience.

Shopping malls is the place where difference type of products can be found with different brands, size, style etc, generally these malls will keep promoters who can educate the consumer about their product, in the late 20th century many traditional market convert into shopping mall as it provide vast option for consumer to purchase product at one place. TV

Shopping channels are dedicated television specialty channels that broadcast products by demonstration or explanation targeted towards home audiences some of whom become consumers. The format of these shows usually includes a host and a guest, the home shopping industry has grown rapidly over the past 30 years. Online shopping is newly emerging in the field of e-business; companies are creating their on-line portals to sell their goods and services to consumer. Online shopping make available before consumer's different types of goods and services.

3. Consumer Awareness

On the Internet front, from a consumer behavior perspective, there is an increase in the number of sites where consumers can provide and read product reviews, and voice their complaints and opinions about various kinds of goods and services (Armstrong and Hagel 1996; Bailey 2004; Boush and Kahle 2001; Chatterjee 2001; O'Leary 2002; Perry 2000). A number of websites and social media platforms allow consumers to provide reviews of and feedback on, various brands that are available in the market place. As a result of the coming of these kinds of sites, customers have approach to loads of information, before and even after making various shopping decisions.

There is a body of research in social psychology that has pointed to the impact that social influence can have on people's behavior (Apanovitch, Hobfoll, and Salovey 2002; Asch 1955; Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak 2001). Social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978) describes a process by which people at same level influence individuals' behavior and attitudes. According to this theory, social information consists of ideas and observations made by people whose views an individual considers important. Researchers have highlighted the effects of social influence in different areas (see, e.g., Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak 2001).

The Internet has led to more connections among consumers and is a platform for the exchange of information among customers (Armstrong and Hagel 1996; Chatterjee 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). The outcome is an excellent growth of interest communities, including those focused on product information. The most popular of these is consumersearch.com, which has a huge collection of member-supplied reviews on a large amount of consumer products. It's a large community with thousands of passionate reviewers and millions of visitors. Also, it uses smart technologies to maintain its appealing site and to generate several revenue streams, including one for the reviewers" (O'Leary 2002)

We studied that customers who buy across multiple product categories from multiple channels, start more contacts with the company, have past experience with the company through the online channel, have longer time duration, more purchasing frequency, are larger and receive information from the company through multiple communication channels, especially through highly interpersonal channels. This shows that there is a positive relation towards multichannel shopping when customers are contacted through various communication channels. Customers who shop across multiple transaction channels provide more revenues, higher share of spending,

have higher past customer value, and have a higher chance of being active than other customers.

4. Literature Review

Concept of Multichannel Shopping:

We defined multichannel shoppers as customers who have made a purchase in more than one channel in the defined time period.

Keltner, 2000 stated that "Companies can initiate contacts with customers through multiple channels, such as direct mail, telemarketing, e-mail, sales personnel, and retail stores. Company's contacts through multiple channels can inform customers about the multitude of options available for purchasing products. Also, companies can use their contact strategy in one channel to motivate customers to migrate to other channels. For example, salespeople can use their contacts to educate customers about the online channel and in the process reduce the customers' perceived risk of using the online channel to make purchases".

Schoenbachler and Gordon (2002) proposed a conceptual framework for understanding the factors of channel choice. They assumed that the risk customers perceived in shopping with a company, past communication from the company, customer motivation, and product category would drive multichannel purchase behavior.

Stone, Hobbs and Khaleeli (2002) proposed that in the current competitive atmosphere companies run the risk of losing customers if they do not provide purchase options across multiple channels. Further, they thought multichannel customers would provide more value and have lower tendency to churn than single-channel shoppers. They also proposed that customers could benefit from shopping through multiple channels because doing so improves convenience and choice.

Farris (2003) believes that "we need to develop models that reflect media synergies and interactions. At the basic level, different contact channels may be seen as having independent effects on multichannel shopping. However, an interaction effect among channels is likely. Investigating interaction effects between different promotional vehicles is complex, and researchers rarely attempt it (Sethuraman & Tellis, 1991). For example, Jagpal (1981) studied radio and print advertising for a commercial bank and was the first to present empirical evidence of synergy in multimedia advertising. Berger and Nasr-Bechwati (2001) accounted for the possibility of media interaction effects in their deterministic model of customer equity. Naik and Raman (2003) found empirical evidence for the existence of synergistic effects between TV and print media. Overall, surprisingly little empirical research has concerned this conceptually appealing effect. In addition, until now, researchers have looked at the impact of sales but have found no empirical evidence for media interaction effects on multichannel shopping".

Correlates of Multichannel Shopping:

Cross-Buying: Cross-buying is defined as "the number of different product categories that a customer has bought from the firm. It is widely acknowledged that the channel of purchase

customers prefer usually depends on the product category (Lynch & Ariely, 2000). Schoenbachler & Gordon (2002) studied that we can expect that customers who exhibit a high degree of cross-buying would be inclined to purchase across multiple channels according to the nature of the different products they purchase. Also, we can reasonably expect customers who exhibit a high degree of cross-buying to be familiar with the firm. Familiarity with a brand or firm tends to reduce the perceived risk in customer purchases, leading to increased multichannel shopping”.

Returns: If a company treats its dissatisfied customers well and try to solve their problem, then these dissatisfied customers can be turned into loyal customers and will spread a positive word of mouth for the company. (Reicheld, 1998). (Schoenbachler & Gordon, 2002) further stated that loyal customers are more familiar with the company and its products, which can lead to multichannel shopping. Customers with longer time period have a higher level of resistance to change than those with shorter time period. They value the convenience of shopping across multiple channels, which could also increase their motivation to do business with the company. Customers who have been purchasing from a company for a long time are familiar with the brand and the company. This familiarity reduces the risk they perceive in making purchases . Also, these customers can be expected to be aware of the multiple channel options available for purchasing products.

Customer-Initiated Contacts: Bowman and Narayandas (2001) found that “customer-initiated contacts are a good indicator of customer loyalty. particularly in business-to-business markets, customerinitiated communication in channels strengthens a relationship, indicates customer involvement, and increases the interdependence of channel members (Ganesan, 1994; Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993) found timely communication improves relationships between channel members”.

Frequency of Web-Based Contacts: Grewal et al. (2001) found that “organizations enter and actively participate in electronic markets if they wish to improve their efficiency in transactions. Participation in electronic markets (or use of Webbased initiatives) improves transaction effectiveness and efficiency (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997). Also, to improve their efficiency, customers generally prefer to conduct transactions through particular channels depending on the product category (Boa, 2003)”.

Customer Tenure: “Customers with longer tenure have a higher level of inertia than those with shorter tenure. They value the convenience of shopping across multiple channels, which could also increase their motivation to do business with the supplier. Customers who have been purchasing from a firm for a long time are familiar with the brand and the firm. This familiarity reduces the risk they perceive in making purchases (Schoenbachler & Gordon, 2002). Also, these customers can be expected to be aware of the multiple channel options available for purchasing products”.

Purchase Frequency: Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that “Customers who have a high frequency of purchases can be

expected to be willing to improve the efficiency of their transactions, and can be expected to be more familiar with the products and brands of the firm than those who seldom purchase. To the extent that the interactions are satisfactory, frequent interactions might increase trust (in other words, reduce perceived risk). Researchers have found that increased frequency of interactions increases the trust between organizations and between individuals”.

Consumer Awareness & Its related Aspects:

According to Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak (2001) “social information consists of comments and observations made by people whose views an individual considers relevant. Researchers have shown the effects of social influence in different spheres”.

Existing research has shown the “impact of the Internet as a medium for consumer feedback and information, and its influence on consumer behavior. Bickart and Schndler (2001), for example, investigated how discussions within online communities impacted consumer behavior. Results from their study pointed to the efficacy of online forums in generating product interest”.

Ratchford, Lee, and Talukdar (2003), in a study “using data on automobile purchases collected in 1990 and 2000, found that the use of the Internet as an information source limited the amount of search in which consumers engaged. This suggests reliance on the Internet as a source of information”.

Chatterjee (2001) investigated “whether negative word-of-mouth information or reviews of online retailers affected evaluations and patronage intentions. In this study, online word-of-mouth information was operationalized as retailer reviews provided by comparison shopping engines, along with purchase information. The study focused on the effects of negative reviews on consumers' decisions to patronize the retailer, given that consumers needed to purchase a particular product. Their results showed that a majority of participants wanted to access product reviews when they were told that these reviews were available”.

Senecal and Nantel (2004) found that “consumers usage of online recommendation sources and found that those participants in their study who consulted product recommendations selected recommended products twice as often as those who did not consult recommendations, with some differences across recommendation source and product category”.

Park and Lessig (1977) suggest that “in the case of informational influence, consumers may search for information from other consumers whom they regard as knowledgeable, or they form their judgments and decisions by observing others. Previous research has also shown an impact of informational influence on consumer behavior”.

Consumer opinion leadership has been of interest to marketers for a long time. “It is based on the idea that there are certain people who are most concerned about the issues and

as well as most articulate...(Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) referred to these people as opinion leaders, and they exert interpersonal influence. Corey (1971) posited that they were models of opinion who could be influencers on marketing efforts by word-of-mouth communication to people around them. Merton (1957) made a distinction between those opinion leaders that influence opinions in limited spheres and those opinion leaders who exert interpersonal influence in several different spheres".

This area of research has studied the link between gender and online behavior, with some of these focusing on the use of information in the online context (Garbarino and Strahilevitz 2004; Ha and Stoel 2004; Sheehan 1999). Sheehan (1999) conducted "a study to assess gender differences in attitudes and behaviors towards marketing communications involving the gathering of online information. They also explored attitudes toward online privacy. Their study established gender differences in concerns for online privacy. Women were more concerned than men about the type of information that they shared online. There were also gender differences in certain online behaviors, such as taking steps to protect one's privacy, with women taking fewer steps than men to safeguard their online privacy".

Ha and Stoel (2004) found "for example, gender differences in the use of the Internet for information search for apparel products. They found that female consumers were more likely to use the Internet for this purpose than male consumers. Garbarino and Strahilevitz (2004) investigated gender differences in the perceptions of risks associated with shopping online. In one study, using a survey, they looked at how men's and women's online shopping risk perceptions changed when they received a recommendation from a friend. In a follow-up experimental study they examined whether there were differences between men and women in their willingness to make an online purchase, based on a friend's recommendation. They found gender differences, with women perceiving a higher level of risk in online purchasing than men. They also found that when a site was recommended by a friend that led to both a greater reduction in perceived risk and a stronger increase in willingness to buy online among women than among men".

Eastman, Eastman, and Eastman (2002) focused "primarily on insurance sales agents and their use of, and attitudes toward, the Internet. Using the Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman (1996) opinion leadership scale, they developed opinion leadership scores, as well as subjective knowledge scores, for these sales agents. They then compared these scores to attitudes toward the Internet. They found that agents with a higher level of subjective knowledge about the Internet were more likely to be opinion leaders about the Internet. In addition, opinion leaders and agents with higher levels of subjective knowledge had a more favorable attitude about the Internet. However, they found significance only for the relationship with opinion leadership. Sales agents who were younger than the mean age of 46 years old were more likely to be opinion leaders, and they had a higher level of subjective knowledge of the Internet. A primary conclusion of these researchers was that that perceived knowledge and the

willingness to discuss the Internet with others impacted the agents' attitude toward the Internet. They also concluded that younger agents would play a major role in how the Internet would be used".

5. Research Methodology:

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To find out the level of consumer awareness in Oman with respect to multi channel shopping environment.
2. The different factors that affect consumer awareness.
3. To find out the current state of multi channel shopping in Oman and the factors responsible for it

Data was collected from the consumers through structured questionnaires to find out the awareness level of consumers towards multichannel shopping environment. In total, 700 responses were received from both students and faculty members. Out of them 201 questionnaires were rejected as some of them were not properly filled and some were left blank, hence were not considered for the analysis.

To measure the internal consistency and reliability of the instrument developed for measuring Consumers' awareness about multichannel, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was calculated by using SPSS. The value of Cronbach's Alpha is summarized below in table:

Table 4.13: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.947	28

As it can be observed that the instrument for Consumers' awareness about multichannel shopping has attained a Cronbach Alpha value as 0.947.

6. Identification of Factors

As it has already been discussed that a separate section containing 28 statements was inserted in questionnaire so as to measure different aspects of consumer awareness. To eliminate the problems in analyzing large number of variables i.e. 28, closely related variables have been clubbed using factor analysis. The technique factor analysis provides an easy and proper way to reducing number of variables in a research problem to a concise or manageable number by combining selected ones in to factors (Nargundkar, 2005). A four factor solution was sought from factor analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The principle component analysis method of extraction and varimax method of rotation has been used. Before using factor techniques, the appropriateness of data set for factor model was tested using Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO). The value of KMO statistic 0.904 was found which is greater than the desirable value 0.5. Thus the correlation between the pairs of variables is explained by other variables and hence factor analysis was found to be an appropriate analysis technique.

Bartel's-test of sphericity was used to test the null hypothesis that variables are uncorrelated, thus the correlation matrix is identity matrix. As it can be seen from the below table that the appropriate chi-square statistic is significant at 0.05

level. The appropriateness of factor analysis is thus automatically proved.

4.2.iii KMO and Bartlett's Test

Table 4.14 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.904
	Approx. Chi-Square	14209.682
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	378
	Sig.	.000

The four factor solution given by SPSS has explained 72.557 % variance. These factors were extracted by using rotated component matrix and were identified according to

largest loading values in a particular factor. The loading values of rotated component matrix are shown in table.

Table 4.15: Rotated Component Matrix

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
One face to cust.	.119	.869	-.102	.056
Effective Segment	.084	.910	.106	.022
Consistent Exp.	.040	.897	.145	.095
Cust. Feedback	.074	.907	.143	-.007
Innovation need	.102	.918	.077	.039
Contact staff role	.269	.106	.035	.786
Differentiated Exp.	.411	.088	.406	.500
Traffic match desired profile	.291	.070	.134	.780
Effective Target	.387	.069	.345	.575
Under penetration	.396	.075	.303	.679
Sig. Growth oppor.	.342	.090	.751	.130
Use of web	.283	.092	.779	.214
Reach grow spaces	.329	.052	.821	.100
Not well served	.368	.160	.734	.168
Future solutions	.409	.072	.689	.134
More cost	.802	.248	.204	.202
High unit cost	.752	.120	.303	.191
Unmanageable cost	.822	.178	.183	.175
Unpredictable cost	.776	.130	.252	.189
More Varieties	.759	.178	.264	.169
More convenience	.779	.026	.227	.230
Different purposes	.720	.091	.300	.220
Customer Loyalty	.602	.183	.350	.284
Brand Equity	.777	.093	.215	.221
Overall cust. exp.	.732	.061	.303	.276
Use of technology	.249	.722	-.074	.116
Price Difference	.115	.858	.159	.018
Product quality	.129	.819	.108	.131

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
 a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Table 4.16: Total Variance Explained

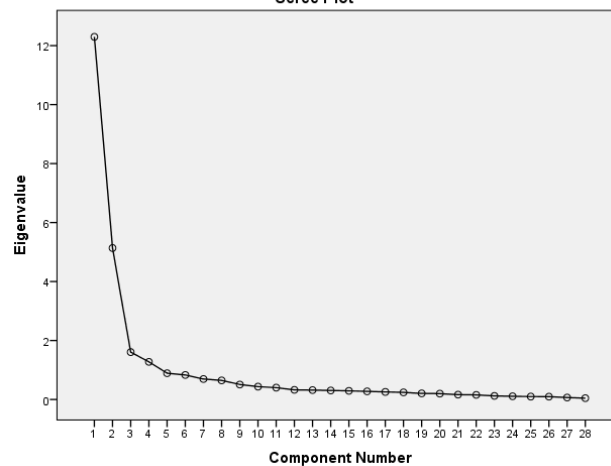
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings	
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance
1	12.297	43.919	43.919	12.297	43.919
2	5.136	18.343	62.261	5.136	18.343
3	1.607	5.738	68.000	1.607	5.738
4	1.276	4.557	72.557	1.276	4.557
5	.891	3.181	75.738		
6	.832	2.972	78.710		
7	.693	2.476	81.187		
8	.647	2.310	83.496		
9	.507	1.812	85.308		
10	.436	1.557	86.866		
11	.402	1.436	88.302		
12	.326	1.164	89.465		

13	.318	1.135	90.600		
14	.305	1.091	91.691		
15	.294	1.048	92.739		
16	.275	.984	93.722		
17	.257	.916	94.639		
18	.240	.859	95.498		
19	.206	.736	96.233		
20	.197	.705	96.938		
21	.165	.588	97.526		
22	.155	.553	98.079		
23	.122	.437	98.516		
24	.110	.392	98.907		
25	.098	.351	99.258		
26	.096	.343	99.601		
27	.067	.238	99.839		
28	.045	.161	100.000		

Total Variance Explained

Component	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	43.919	7.061	25.216	25.216
2	62.261	6.276	22.415	47.631
3	68.000	4.067	14.525	62.156
4	72.557	2.912	10.401	72.557
5				
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Scree Plot



The variables or statements of questionnaire clubbed under factors were as under:

Factor 1: This factor has Total Initial Eigen value of 12.297 and explains 43.919% of total variance. This factor includes ten variables or ten different dimensions namely:

- i. Cost more to company
- ii. High unit cost in multichannel
- iii. channel cost as unmanageable
- iv. channel cost as unpredictable
- v. More options in terms of varieties
- vi. Multichannel is offering more convenience
- vii. For different different purposes
- viii. More customer loyalty
- ix. Enhances brand equity
- x. Enhances overall customer experience

Factor 2: This factor has Total Initial Eigen value of 5.136 and explains 18.343% of total variance. This factor includes eight variables or eight different dimensions namely:

- i. Presents 'one face' to the customer
- ii. Operationalise its segmentation effectively
- iii. Consistent experience being delivered
- iv. Customer feedback considered as important
- v. Need to innovate
- vi. Use of technology
- vii. Price Difference
- viii. Product quality

Factor 3: This factor has Total Initial Eigenvalue of 1.607 and explains 5.738% of total variance. This factor includes five variables or five different dimensions namely:

- i. Significant opportunities for growth
- ii. Effective use being made of the web

- iii. Reaching the growing product/market spaces
- iv. Specific customer groups that are not well served
- v. New market propositions in terms of future solutions

Factor 4: This factor has Total Initial Eigen value of 1.276 and explains 4.557% of total variance. This factor includes four variables or four different dimensions namely:

- i. The contact staff provide an effective experience
- ii. Providing a differentiated experience to consumers
- iii. Customer traffic match the desired profiles
- iv. To target customer segments effectively
- v. Customer groups are under-penetrated

7. Findings & Conclusion

The present study is done in the country of Oman. The most of consumers were young and aged between 20-25 years in which female consumers were more than male consumers. Most of the females were house wives and well educated. The economic status of the sampled respondents was well to do. Retail stores were the most preferred place of purchasing and they tend to purchase selected products on monthly basis.

The consumers were focused on service criteria provided by the particular brand and the discount is least considerable. Since, the survey is done in the urban areas of the selected cities, the respondents were quite aware about different brands.

The present study is extracted the following dimensions which significantly affect the Consumer Behaviour with respect to packaging:

Table 5.1: Crucial Dimensions for Multichannel Shopping Environment

1.	Cost more to company	15	Need to innovate
2	High unit cost in multichannel	16	Use of technology
3	channel cost as unmanageable	17	Price Difference
4	channel cost as unpredictable	18	Product quality
5	More options in terms of varieties	19	Significant opportunities for growth
6	Multichannel is offering more convenience	20	Effective use being made of the web
7	For different different purposes	21	Reaching the growing product/market spaces
8	More customer loyalty	22	Specific customer groups that are not well served
9	Enhances brand equity	23	New market propositions in terms of future solutions
10	Enhances overall customer experience	24	The contact staff provide an effective experience
11	Presents 'one face' to the customer	25	Providing a differentiated experience to consumers
12	Operationalise its segmentation effectively	26	Customer traffic match the desired profiles
13	Consistent experience being delivered	27	To target customer segments effectively.
14	Customer feedback considered as important	28	Customer groups are under-penetrated

The study is showing that there are many factors related to awareness of multichannel shopping environment. The

benefits or advantages offered by multichannel shopping environment is much more than a single channel.. The study is

also showing that consumers prefer multichannel shopping environment in comparison to a single channel.

The consumers are made aware of multichannel shopping environment by companies through various ways and it is win-

win situation for both consumers and companies as it help the companies in better segmentation and penetration, similarly for consumers they got advantage of cost and better product varieties.

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