

# **Analysis of Digital Communication as a Tool for Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in Pakistan during Covid-19**

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## **Abstract:**

This study analyses the role and effectiveness of digital media in strengthening the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) during the coronavirus pandemic based on the fraction of selection, uses and gratification theory, and media ecology theory. This study also investigates the current practical implications and practices of digital communication for CRM by gathering information from the CRM professionals through survey research. The drawbacks, barriers and limitations in the practice are also inquired while the impact of digital communication as a tool for CRM is also inquired by gathering feedback from the customers. Data analysis has proven that digital communication has a significant impact on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) efficiency however, there is still a major ground for improvement. It is identified that companies and professionals are experimenting with several practices due to which customers also feel agitated. The study suggests that digital communication is only going to be strengthened and more widely relied upon for CRM in near future by both professionals and customers. Therefore, companies should give more importance to their better execution by having skilled CRM analysts and professionals. This research can help the companies trace down the most and least rewarding digital media, encounter the limitations and come up with CRM strategies that solve the customer's reservations. Finally, it also discusses the future trends in digital communication for CRM predicted by the professionals.

**Keywords:** *Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Digital Communications, Digital Media, CRM in Pakistan, Media Ecology*

*Theory, Fraction of Selection, Uses and gratification theory, Covid-19 pandemic*

**Introduction**

As the technology keeps on changing, the focus of mass communication researches is also changing. With the advent of digital communication technology, the world of communication has completely changed. It has now become a matter of a few clicks that a person can connect, interact and engage with an audience spread across the globe and that too within a few minutes. This limitless reach to the audience, cost, time effectiveness, and numerous modern features, have made digital communication rise to heights of popularity and significance in every race of life. From interpersonal communication to mass communication, it has now become impossible not to consider the influence of digital communication tools. Hence, corporate communication and marketing is not an exception. Taking this opportunity, lots of companies have been implying digital communication in almost all aspects of their business such as marketing, research, logistics, innovation, etc.(Nguyen, 2017)

Similarly, digital communication is the best to strengthen customer relationship management (CRM). In terms of CRM, digital communication channels are widely used, however, not much is known about its impact and effectiveness in Pakistan. This study attempted to analyse, with the help of survey research, how CRM professional in Pakistan used digital communication for CRM during the corona virus pandemic. The study investigates the major trends, popular tools, reasons for its popularity, and its impact.

Specifically, the researchers analyse the barriers and limitations that have come to the surface during the implication. Moreover, in the process, the feedback and opinions of customers have also been obtained to have a deeper and better understanding of the effectiveness of the digital tools used in CRM with an aim to help the companies and professionals identify the loopholes and areas which needs to be paid more attention.

**Rationale for the Study**

This research analyses the digital communication as a tool for customer relationship management during the pandemic. Specifically, how businesses in Pakistan builds up and develops ideas of CRM with the use

of digital communication. Moreover, in the process, the effectiveness, importance and drawbacks of digital communication as well as its current trends are also highlighted to have a better understanding of the topic. The outcomes of the research are aimed to become a helpful guide for business communication professionals to understand the potential and shortcomings during the difficult times of pandemic.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Whether it's about supporting cognition or strengthening socialization, communication plays an important role in a human being's life. George A. Theodorson and Achilles G. Theodorson referred communication to transmission of information, perspectives, or sentiments from one person or group to another with the help of symbols. These symbols can greatly vary from words to signs and signals. (Nguyen, 2017) In addition to the symbols, the process of communication holds other crucial elements which include source, encoding and decoding process, receivers, and noise. In contrast with its outlook, the process of communication is a bit complicated as the mentioned elements (or others) can easily create an impact on it. Therefore, the factors are of utmost importance to effectively convey the message.

As technology kept developing, many forms of communication came forth depending on the ever dynamic needs of people and the world. From verbal to written, the communication has greatly evolved. After the boom of internet, the whole world witnessed a noticeable rise of digital communication. (Yang, 2021)

Digital communication means any form of communication that transfer the data in digital form i.e., 0 and 1, carried out with the help of technology and electronic media. (Lies, 2019). The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a tidal wave of revolution in digital communications, especially about its scope, and applications. It is any type of communication carried out in a digital environment with the help of an electronic medium. However, digital communication does not only mean the Internet as our society is now buzzing with more digital communication tools than just the Internet of which a few main forms of digital communication are:

- Internet is a wide network connecting different computers across the globe. Its worldwide web of communication channel Web is estimated to use by more than half population on the globe
- The email was first introduced in the 1960s and since then these have been widely acclaimed and used as one of the most eminent digital communication tools in both public and private environments.
- Mobile phones have risen as commonly used tool of digital communication after the introduction of a smartphone with 3G and Wi-Fi in the mid-2000s and now 4G in recent years. Earlier the cellular phones were only used for calls and Short Message Services (SMS), however, now smartphones are used for multiple practical communication including multimedia messages, voice and video calls, to name few.
- High-definition (HD) Television with the support of recent technological innovations has become a tool of digital communication as these HD TVs are capable of the stream the Internet, play games, do shopping, etc.
- Physical digital media are also widely used to exchange and share digital files in the online environment. Therefore, it is also another widely used tool of digital communication.
- Social media technology due to its widespread impact on digital communications, has crucial importance in this research study. (Lies, 2019)

“The term social media technology (SMT) refers to web based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organizations to create, engage, and share new user-generated or existing content, in digital environments through multi-way communication.”(Lestaro, 2021)

Social media has enabled individuals and organizations to exchange messages anywhere around the globe in real-time through several digital channels. (Nguyen, 2017) From approaching new customers to high interactivity, SMT’s domination in the world of digital communication has made it extremely important for business purposes.

From individuals to state level, NGOs to multinational companies, everyone has made an attempt to utilize the digital communication in their benefit such as networking, partnership, marketing, information

collection, logistics, innovation, client and customer relationship management.

Customer relationship management (CRM) refers to building one-to-one relationships with customers that can drive value for the firm (Bernes, 2021). CRM refers to a set of policies and practices, with the help of which a business tries to identify its potential customers, while maintaining satisfactory relationship with its existing customers. Companies tend to collect and analyse the data of the interaction with an aim to further strengthen the customer service. Customer data is always important for companies. CRM also refers to the classification of customers as; at risk, profitable and customer retention, with the help of this approach businesses tend to understand the customer loyalty and also identify the customers that generates a high-profit. (Auliana, 2018) CRM also employ business strategy, practices, and information technology (IT) so that a business can generate revenue through understanding and satisfying every customer's needs.(Knox S, 2013)

Companies are focusing more on CRM as their main strategy because 'retaining customers more beneficial than attracting new ones because it costs less time, efforts, resources and energy. (Fiiwe, 2023)

Customer relationship is being discussed since the 1980s and the discussion itself changes every era due to the dynamic environment of business.(Auliana, 2018) Each era of business environment has had its own characteristics which greatly affected how the customer relationships are carried out. With the advancement of technologies, more and more businesses are managing their customer relationship digitally in a more efficient way.(Auliana, 2018)

Digital communication channels such as website, emails, social media, and apps, etc., help a business carry out the management efficiently. Digital Communication can help in providing effective services to customers and can also "facilitate understanding of common variable demands by which many organizations may increase services' quality from the customers' point of view".(Jamali, 2013)

As more advancement is being carried out in internet technology, it has been bestowed with a significant role in CRM. In an attempt to analyse the effects of a website feature on the relation between customer relationship management (CRM) and customer loyalty, the data from 170

Canadian IT organizations were collected. The study showed that the website's features along with the levels of the organizations' internet presence and interactivity have a prominent impression of the relationship between the two (CRM and Customer loyalty). A few key factors which influenced the relation were empowerment, relations with customers, and personalization. To summarize, the use of the Internet for CRM results in increased customer loyalty towards a company. (Assion Lawson-Body, July 2004)

Besides being mobile, much faster, and more cost-effective than traditional communication, the level and efficiency of interactivity in digital communication are also much higher. Digital tools of communication are more than able to carry out a two-way interaction with their receivers. These qualities make digital communication ideal for corporate communications, especially in managing customer relationships.

The interaction with the customers holds a notable significance for the company as when a message is sent to a customer, it may be difficult to interpret or customers can get the wrong interpretation. Therefore, two-way communication is extremely vital for a company.

The highly interactive communication with customers does not only provide sufficient data for product development for the companies but also offers them a finer chance to establish a long-term relationship with customers and loyalty. Besides its advantages, digital communications can be a "double-edged sword" if a professional does not have appropriate knowledge about it. However, with a proper understanding of its drawbacks, companies can avert the chances of its backfire. (Nguyen, 2017)

- Absence Physical Element is the most basic yet important drawback of digital communication especially for maintaining customer relations. As we know that the communication is a complex process with its weight on many factors, expression or body language is one of these. All the physical gestures together make a message strong and more effective. "Research seconds that expressions, gestures, etc. accumulate 65% of any communication" (Nguyen, 2017)

- However, digital tools of transmission do not provide many physical cues which can result in the customer misinterpreting the message.
- Security is at risk for companies using digital tools for communication to manage customer relationships. When using these tools, the data and important information is uploaded on the cloud, etc., which can be easily hacked into. as cybercrime is the most rapidly growing crime which surprisingly has generates revenue of up to \$3 trillion annually.
- On the other hand, many sites and applications demand the customers to “agree with policy” which can also cause a threat to their privacy.
- Lack of technological facilities is another drawback of digital communications. Many customers have access to these tools however, there is still a notable population that doesn't. Even if they do, they either are not very familiar with the technology or hesitate to entirely put in their trust in the digital message. Moreover, the digital message created by a company may reach their customers in some altered form because these messages are widely dependent on the gadgets, models and other features therefore, these either should be responsive or designed to be suitable for every customer

The novel coronavirus pandemic has intensified the need to smartly and effectively implement digital communications in order to keep a business running. Similarly, to keep existing customers engaged and at the same time, attract more potential customers, digital communication has become the key aspect of a business. Since the world entered into the lockdown and everything switched to the digital world, it is no longer a mere trend to use the digital communication as tool to maintain customer relations but a necessity to keep up with in the business environment. (Nguyen, 2017)

Businesses are no longer adapting the push strategy rather they are applying pull strategy because the customers have become the centre point and companies are aiming at sustaining the long term relationships

with their customers. Pakistani companies, unlike past, are now focusing on the customers. Previously, it was a common practice for the companies to produce products in bulk, however, now the practice of customization is getting more common (Hassan et al., 2015). The customization is done according to the demand of the customer, therefore, the need of even more efficient and timely communication with the customers is crucial more than ever.

**Research Questions:**

Following the popularity of digital communication for business, this study significance is for every organization and CRM professionals. The uses of digital communication channels for businesses are constantly expanding. However, its implication and impact in Pakistan is not certain. In addition, the scope, effectiveness and limitation of digital communication in the country during the pandemic are also not known. That is why this study intends to focus on analysing the digital CRM practices with the following set of objectives:

RQ1: How effective the digital communication proved to be for CRM in Pakistan during the pandemic?

RQ2: Which digital channels, features and approaches have proved to be successful for CRM in Pakistan during the pandemic?

RQ3: What are the prominent barriers and limitations in the implications of CRM through digital communication in Pakistan?

**Theoretical Framework:**

Digital communication is highly interactive where communication can take place in both ways i.e. the feedback is delivered at a much faster speed. Researchers for the last fifty years after attempting to propose a modern theory that can clearly illustrate the repercussions of digital media by focussing on new questions (why people use specific media), developed the *active-audience theories*.



Fraction of Selection (FoS): The Fraction of Selection is an early-active audience theory that explains why and how the audience prefers one channel of media over the other. It explains that “people weigh the level of reward (gratification) they expect from a given medium or message against how much effort they must make to secure that reward.” (Baran, 2013)

In this study, the FoS can provide us with the ground to analyse the rationale behind the hype of digital communication as a tool for customer relationship management. The CRM professionals and customers both turn towards these platforms because their ‘expectation of rewards’ (the benefits that digital communication holds) is much greater than the ‘efforts’ they need to put in to achieve that reward. Moreover, Wilbur Schramm argued that all of us ‘choose the content based on our expectations of having some need met.’ (Ibid) This theory helps in this study in finding out whether the ‘expected reward’ of digital communication in terms of CRM was met or not, during the covid-19 in Pakistan or either of the ‘efforts required’ overweighed the reward.

**Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT):**

Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is also an *active-audience theory* that focuses on the “uses for which people actively seek out specific media and the gratifications they seek from those uses.” (Ibid) This study is also grounded on the UGT which explores that the CRM professionals, companies and customers ‘prefer’ to use digital channels over the traditional based on their ‘uses and gratifications. UGT helps in interpreting audience uses and gratification and in exploring whether their uses are sought during the times of pandemic through digital channels.

**Media Ecology Theory:**

Media Ecology Theory (MET) studies how “media, technology and communication influence human perception, emotions, and understanding”. (Moreno et al. 2016). Marshall McLuhan through this theory attempted to explain the relationship between technology and members of a specific culture (Ibid) therefore MET focuses on the influence of media technology on society.

Besides the preference of choosing digital communication, this study is also grounded on the Media Ecology Theory to understand the ways CRM professionals and companies use the digital communication

channels to increase the gratifications and expectations of rewards and why customers also prefer digital communication despite the fear of their privacy invasion or personal data invasion.

**Research Methodology:**

The research has been carried out under Quantitative Research Method which means research that employs empirical methods and empirical statements, usually expressed in numerical terms.(Stockemer, 2019)

Quantitative research is used to analyse the role of different digital communication media in maintaining customer relationships in Pakistan by comparing the professional practices carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic with its impact by investigating the customer's feedback on the matter. To obtain a good insight into the subject, collected professional's opinions on the use of digital communications for CRM to identify its scope and limitations. In addition, the customers' reservations are also taken into account for an objective inquiry.

The tool used to efficiently conduct this research is the survey form. Survey research with the help of scientific sampling and questionnaires attempts to gather data from the population. The survey research is effective for making comparisons between fractions of the population.

The cross-sectional survey research has been conducted in Pakistan. Purposive sampling is used in which CRM professionals (CRM analyst, CRM managers, Customer Service Managers, Customer Relationship Representatives, Customer Service Representatives, Social Media Representatives) in Pakistan from different corporate sectors (Retailers, Multinational Corporations (MNC), Educational Institutes, IT companies, Banks, and Brands) are asked to fill a survey form about their personal experiences of CRM practices, opinions and barriers during the covid-19 pandemic. The population for this survey has been kept hundred. While analysing the impact of the CRM, customers in Pakistan are also asked to fill a survey form about their personal experiences and feedback about companies' and brands CRM practices during the covid-19 pandemic. The population kept for this survey research are 200. The N respondents were chosen random irrespective of their age, occupation, or gender.

### Results and Discussion:

The data collected from the surveys highlighted that about 100% of professionals agree that digital communication is more effective for CRM in comparison with traditional means of communication (figure 1) while 96.2% also agreed that it also helps an organisation in maintaining customer loyalty. Only, 3.8% of professionals remained neutral on the statement (figure 2).

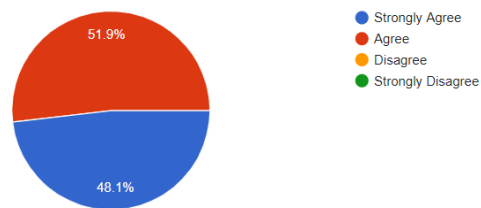


Figure 1

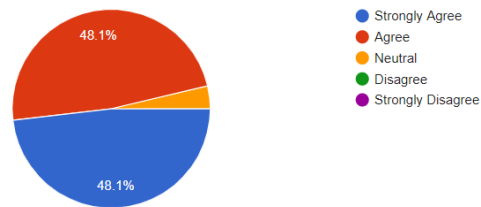


Figure 2

However, when the professionals were asked about the situation in Pakistan, their opinions greatly changed. Around 66.6% of them were of the view that the implication of digital communication as a tool for CRM in Pakistan is less rewarding than in the rest of the world. A substantial 22% remained neutral on the statement while only 11.1% disagreed (figure 3).

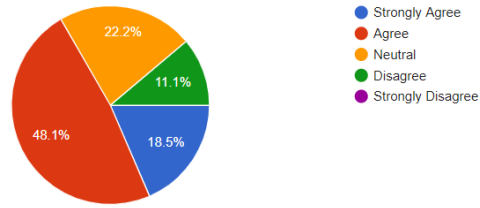


Figure 3

In contrast, 84.9% of customers think Pakistani companies effectively use digital communications in maintaining this customer relationship (figure 4). However, the majority of the customers still think that companies pay less attention to customer interaction on digital media compared to traditional media (figure 5).

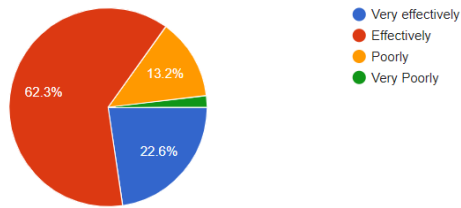


Figure 4

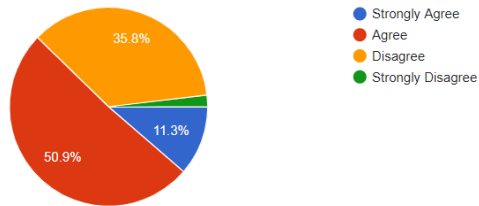
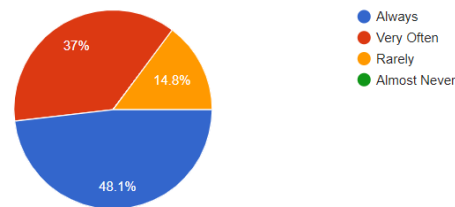


Figure 5

There can be multiple reasons behind this however, a few prominent reasons that the professionals pointed out include lack of internet electricity and other facilities. A professional mentioned that “Usually in Pakistan the biggest barrier in using the digital tool is the unsatisfactory and poor network provision. Delayed and incomplete communication with the customer can be a huge drawback.” Even if customers are reached out to, the level of literacy about the digital platforms is very low among them and also, not every professional is aware of the complete potential of the platforms. Due to which lack of awareness is also another highlighted pointer. Besides, customer’s engagement also suffers due to the lack of trustworthiness of customers. As one professional customer mentioned, “we are used to traditional communication believing that online interaction is difficult.”

A hypothesis also hold that many customers may don’t appreciate the gravity of the matter or they may feel the lack of physical presence to give honest feedback through digital media which can also lead to being the ineffectiveness. However, 85% of professionals were of the view that the feedback received from customers through digital media proves to be fruitful for an organization (figure 6).



*Figure 6*

Nevertheless, 50% professionals agreed that digital communication has proven to be beneficial for their organization’s CRM during the pandemic (figure 7).

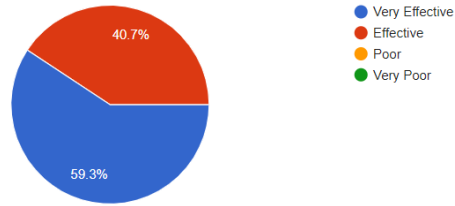


Figure 7

The professionals were also asked to specify that particular digital media platform that has proved to be most (figure 8) and least (figure 9) rewarding for their company's CRM, to which the following response was obtained.

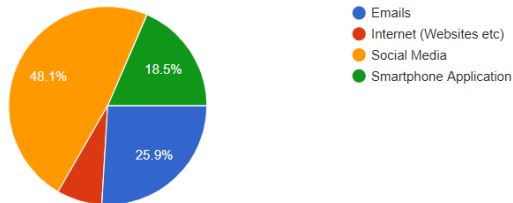


Figure 8 (Most Rewarding)

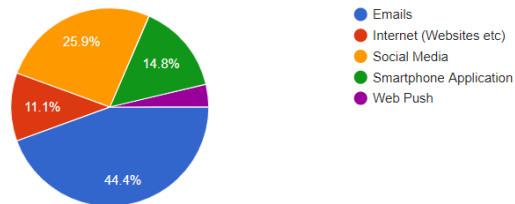


Figure 9 (Least Rewarding)

While when they were again asked the same question, however, this time particularly during the covid-19 pandemic, their response was as follows (figure 10 and 11):

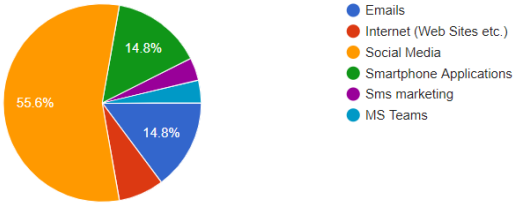


Figure 10 (Most Rewarding during Covid-19)

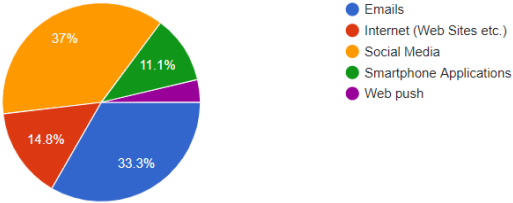


Figure 11 (Least Rewarding during Covid-19)

We can also observe a few new tools added which were not mentioned in the responses before the pandemic. However, the responses are heavily mixed which shows the dynamic nature of the digital communication platforms. It also supports the customers’ view that Pakistani professionals are not very clear about the use and impact of the tool, rather experimenting with a variety of them. This ground was also established on a few customers’ responses that stated, our professionals are not very well-trained, “with the pandemic and current situation in view, it is high time for the professionals to make improvements by having skilled personnel for operating the digital platforms.” While a few also expressed that companies should improve their communication tactics by employing better and more support from employees so that their CRM can be strengthened. However, the professionals themselves disagreed with the possibility. Only 29.6% of them admitted that the

professionals in Pakistan are using digital communication tools for CRM poorly (figure 12).

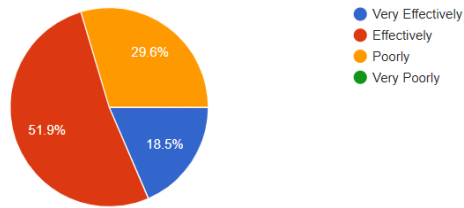


Figure 12

On the other hand, customers find social media the best to interact with companies' while mobile applications and emails are the second most top priority (figure 13). However, when it comes to sending feedback the customers still prefer emails after social media (figure 14).

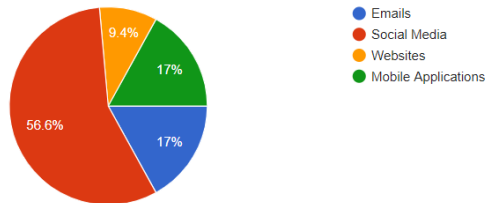


Figure 13

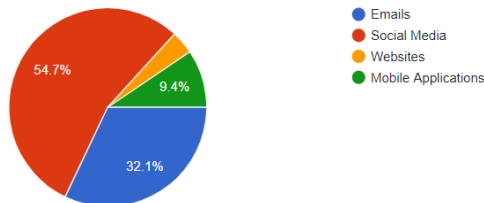


Figure 14



On contrary, we saw that professionals think the emails are not that rewarding. A negative correlation is pointed out.

Moreover, 41.5% of customers think that companies often give a good response to their feedback on digital media while 35.8% think it's *more often*. However, it should be noted a good response is not expected *always*. On the other hand, 17% of customers also think that they *almost never* get a good response from companies through digital media (figure 15).

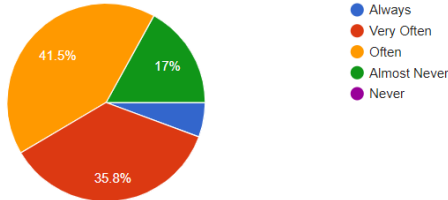


Figure 15

This surety diminished a bit when the customers were asked about how often they think that companies, in Pakistan, value their feedback to improve their product or services (figure 16).

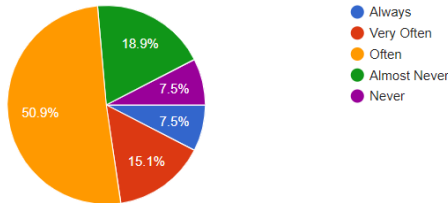


Figure 16

7.5% respondents selected “never” while the section of ‘very often’ has also reduced to only 15%. It shows that companies in Pakistan are not giving much importance to customers’ feedback (figure 16).

Also, many customers agreed (mostly agreed) that companies do not solve the problems or issues of customers when shared through digital media (figure 17).

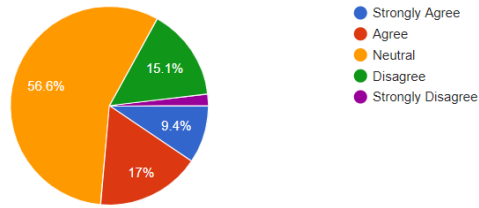


Figure 17

In addition, due to the company's poor use of digital communication to interact with customers, the majority of the customers had to physically make a visit and complain during the pandemic (figure 18).

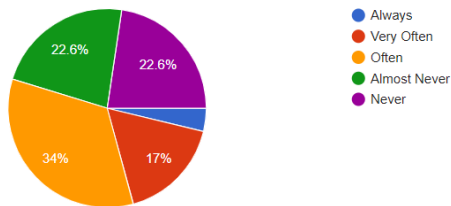


Figure 18

The problem of level of trust was also confirmed when the customers agreed that they hesitate while sharing their personal information (age, contact number etc.) with companies on digital media (figure 19).

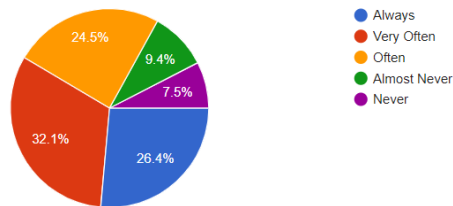


Figure 19

This is not due to the fact that the customers ever personally experienced it. 32% never personally experienced that their personal information shared with these companies on digital media was sold or their privacy

was disturbed 22.6% *almost never* experienced it. While 34% was the target of this privacy impeachment (figure 20).

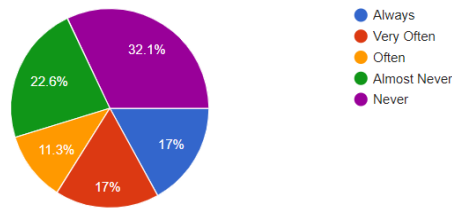


Figure 20

This privacy impeachment experience does also affect the customers retaining as 37.7% stopped using the particular company's services or product once. While 15.1% didn't give it much consideration, directing towards the fact that it doesn't affect them much (figure 21).

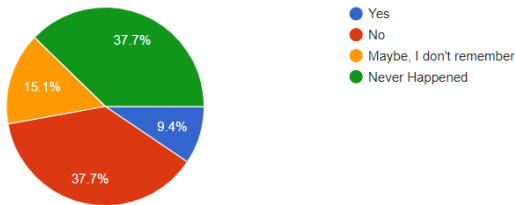


Figure 21

Despite the uncertainty and dynamic nature, we observed that digital communications are heavily relied upon for CRM. The professionals explained the exact reasons why CRM is better to be done through these platforms.

Almost all digital communication platforms offer the professionals the feasibility to produce consistent, cross-channel content. This provides a uniform customer experience. It is also used to dispatch specific content towards particular customers at a certain time.

CRM professionals also shared that social media is an easy way of communication because almost everyone is using it which gives them a better reach. In addition, "responding to customer queries and interacting

with potential ones through (Facebook) groups” and “Instagram stories and posts” to keep them engaged and interested in the business are also mentioned. Other more advanced features of websites and mobile applications such as Pay-per-click (PPC) and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) to identify and attract potential customers are also the reason why digital communication is preferred.

Some other frequent responses include:

- “Because Social Media Marketing tool is very important to engage customers easily”
- “Digital communication tools are cost-effective, easy to use, and instant”
- “Customers use Instagram stories for giving reviews which spreads the word about the quality of your products hence it generates sales.”
- “WhatsApp is an app that is installed to almost every phone these days which made the customer and company more accessible to each other.”
- “Digital media platforms allow easy access to the customers.”

The professionals think that social media will grow to be a more effective and powerful digital media platform in Pakistan in future while IT software such as intellicom will also be a part of the trends. Many think that Microsoft (MS) Team, Google Meet, Zoom and others will also help in connecting with customers.

#### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, digital communication’s numerous features and widespread use has made it a beneficial tool for Companies and CRM professionals especially when it comes to reach out to more people and communicate with them. The study aims to analyse the way CRM activities are being carried out through digital communication in Pakistan and their impact or effectiveness especially during the covid-19 pandemic. The literature review and theoretical framework provides a strong base to understand the effects of digital media on consumers and the importance of digital media for professionals. The survey research helps in discussing the information from the professionals and compared it with the feedback of the customers to find out the extent to which digital communication has been effective in the country during the pandemic. This study concludes that Pakistani companies and

professionals are using several digital media tools and features to carry out CRM which intensified during the pandemic. On the other hand, the customers are also heavily relying on digital channels despite the uncertain factors (privacy impeachment etc.), point towards the great potential of digital communication.

However, the customers are not entirely satisfied with the CRM practices and think that there is still a great need for improvement for the number of reasons discussed in the study. The companies and customers have found the digital channels helpful during the pandemic, while few customers physically visit the companies because their digital communication with the company failed. Lack of technology, electricity, etc. is also a reason behind the limited scope of CRM through digital media in Pakistan. Better technology, more skilled employees and their improved professional practices based on the training can widen the scope of digital communication in Pakistan. The companies should conduct more in-depth research about their customers and updated CRM techniques based on digital analytics should be implied by the professionals because the significance of digital communication for CRM only seems to grow stronger in the coming future.

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