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EXPLORING HOW UZBEK STUDENTS ENGAGE WITH AND PERCEIVE ONLINE MARKETING STRATEGIES ON THE UZUM APPLICATION: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Abdumannofov Komiljon Abdumalik Ugli¹; Dr, Chairul Furqon, S, Sos, M. M²; Baxodirov Jaxongir Baxodir O'g'li³

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Tashkent State University of Economics, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abdumanopovkomiljon2021@gmail.com¹, Furqon@Upi.edu², J.bakhodirov@tsue.uz³

Abstract - *This study examines how university students in Uzbekistan engage with and perceive online marketing strategies on the Uzum application, a rapidly growing digital platform in the country's evolving digital economy. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve students to explore their experiences, interpretations, and responses to Uzum's marketing features. Thematic analysis revealed four major patterns: perceived usefulness and convenience, trust and credibility, personalization and relevance, and user frustration due to ad fatigue. Findings indicate that while students appreciate time-saving promotions and personalized recommendations, their engagement is shaped by the transparency of prices, consistency of marketing messages, and prior experiences with the platform. However, excessive notifications and irrelevant recommendations can reduce satisfaction and trust. Overall, the study highlights the importance of user-centered marketing approaches and provides insights for digital platforms seeking to enhance engagement among young consumers in emerging digital markets.*

Keywords: *Uzum application; digital marketing; student perceptions; qualitative interviews; user engagement; Uzbekistan digital economy*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed how consumers interact with brands, information, and online marketplaces, particularly in emerging economies such as Uzbekistan. Among the most influential digital platforms in the country is Uzum, a multifunctional super-app offering e-commerce, financial services, delivery solutions and digital payment options to millions of users. As digital platforms grow, so does the need to understand how different user segments interpret, respond to, and engage with online marketing strategies deployed within these ecosystems. One of the most active and digitally literate user groups in Uzbekistan is university students, who frequently rely on mobile applications for shopping, communication, financial transactions, and entertainment. This makes them a strategically important audience for digital marketers and a valuable group for exploring perceptions of marketing strategies. The present study focuses on how Uzbek students engage with and perceive online marketing strategies on the Uzum application, offering qualitative insights into user experiences within the country's evolving digital economy. The emergence of Uzbekistan's digital economy has accelerated over the last decade, driven by national reforms, increased internet penetration, and the rapid adoption of smartphones

among young people. According to recent economic analyses, digitalisation has become a major catalyst for economic diversification and consumer-market innovation in Central Asia (Turaev, 2021). Scholars argue that the rise of digital platforms is reshaping not only commercial practices but also everyday consumption patterns, particularly among younger and more technologically adaptive demographics (Akhmedov, 2021). E-commerce studies emphasise that customer engagement is increasingly shaped by algorithmic recommendations, personalised promotions, social media integration and app-based advertising (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). These tools influence how users evaluate products, make purchase decisions, and develop trust in digital platforms.

Despite the growing scholarly attention to digitalisation in Uzbekistan, research that focuses specifically on user engagement with online marketing strategies within a single platform remains limited. Most existing literature discusses broad trends such as digital transformation, national ICT strategies, and the adoption of digital technologies by businesses and SMEs (Abdullayev & Rustamov, 2022; Yuldashev & Khojjeva, 2022). While this work is valuable, it does not address how young consumers interpret the marketing techniques used by major e-commerce platforms. Moreover, marketing scholarship frequently highlights the importance of understanding consumer perceptions in shaping effective marketing strategies (Kotler et al., 2021). In the context of digital platforms, these perceptions are influenced by factors such as credibility of advertisements, relevance of recommendations, transparency of pricing, app usability, and perceived value of promotional campaigns. Without understanding how users make sense of these strategies, platforms risk misalignment between marketing initiatives and real customer expectations.

Uzum provides an ideal setting for such inquiry, as it has become one of Uzbekistan’s most widely used digital platforms among students due to its combination of affordability, convenience, and digital services. The app employs a variety of online marketing tools, including push notifications, in-app banners, personalised offers, search engine optimisation, influencer partnerships and loyalty programmes. However, how these tools are perceived by young users remains unexamined in academic research. Student engagement may be shaped by factors such as digital literacy, economic constraints, cultural preferences, peer influence, or skepticism toward online promotions—factors that can be better understood through qualitative methods that probe deeper into personal experiences. Given this context, the problem addressed by this study is the lack of empirical understanding of how young consumers in Uzbekistan engage with and interpret online marketing strategies on dominant digital platforms. This problem is important because user perception directly influences purchasing behaviour, platform loyalty, and the overall effectiveness of marketing campaigns. If marketing strategies do not align with user expectations, the platform may experience reduced engagement or ineffective allocation of marketing resources. Thus, understanding students’ perspectives is essential for improving marketing management within the Uzum ecosystem and for guiding firms and practitioners operating in the digital marketplace. To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with university students in Uzbekistan. Qualitative inquiry is well-suited to capturing the complexity of user experiences, personal interpretations, and the subtle meanings young people attach to online marketing. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative research enables researchers to explore subjective perspectives and contextual factors that are often overlooked in quantitative approaches. Through interviews, this research seeks to uncover how students engage with different marketing features on Uzum, how they evaluate credibility and usefulness, and what challenges or frustrations they encounter. By foregrounding user voices, the study contributes new insights into digital consumer behaviour in Uzbekistan and enriches the literature on platform-based marketing in emerging markets. This paper is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the background, research problem, and rationale of the study. The next section provides a review of literature on digital marketing strategies, user engagement theories, and digital transformation in Uzbekistan. The methodology section then describes the qualitative design, sampling approach and interview procedures. The findings section presents thematic insights derived from the interview data, highlighting key patterns in student engagement and perception. Finally, the paper concludes with a

discussion of implications for marketers, platform developers, and policymakers, followed by recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to situate the study within existing research on digital marketing, user engagement, and the development of Uzbekistan’s digital economy. It synthesizes international theoretical frameworks with local empirical findings to clarify what is known, what is debated, and what gaps remain—especially regarding how university students perceive online marketing strategies on platforms such as Uzum.

Digital marketing has undergone significant transformation with the rise of platform-based business models, where mobile applications serve as key channels for customer acquisition, engagement, and retention. Scholars emphasize that digital marketing strategies in platform ecosystems typically include targeted advertising, algorithmic recommendations, real-time promotions, social media integration, and personalised offers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). These features enable firms to reach consumers in ways that are more immediate, interactive, and data-driven than traditional marketing approaches. Research also shows that platforms strategically use behavioural data to tailor content and increase user engagement. For example, Kotler et al. (2021) argue that the technological shift toward AI-driven marketing—often labelled “Marketing 5.0”—creates more personalised user experiences but also raises concerns about privacy, autonomy, and information overload. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2020) find that personalised recommendations can increase purchase likelihood but may also trigger skepticism if consumers perceive them as intrusive. These findings highlight both the opportunities and potential drawbacks of digital marketing practices on large platforms. Although the existing literature provides strong foundations for understanding digital marketing mechanics, most studies focus on global platforms such as Amazon, Alibaba or TikTok. There is comparatively little research on how these strategies operate in smaller emerging markets where institutional, cultural, and technological contexts differ. This gap makes it essential to explore how users in Uzbekistan interpret platform-based marketing features that are influenced by both local preferences and global digital trends.

User engagement is a central concept in digital marketing research, generally defined as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural investment users make in digital platforms (Brodie et al., 2013). High engagement is often linked to positive perceptions of platform value, ease of use, and perceived trustworthiness. Several studies highlight that young adults and university students form a unique digital demographic: they are highly exposed to online advertising, technologically adaptable, and often motivated by convenience and affordability (Prensky, 2009; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Research on consumer perception reveals that several factors shape responses to online marketing: brand credibility, relevance of advertisements, transparency of pricing, and the perceived authenticity of influencers. Djafarova and Bowes (2021), for example, show that young consumers rely heavily on peer recommendations and influencer endorsements when evaluating product information. Meanwhile, Hamouda (2018) argues that students are increasingly critical of digital advertising, particularly when they perceive promotional messages as repetitive or manipulative. Despite the global evidence on youth engagement, there is a limited number of studies examining these dynamics in Central Asia. While scholars acknowledge that young users in developing economies often drive digital adoption, their motivations, expectations, and concerns are shaped by cultural norms, digital literacy levels, and local market conditions (Rahim et al., 2020). This suggests that findings from Western or East Asian contexts cannot be applied directly to the Uzbek environment without empirical validation.

Uzbekistan’s digital economy has expanded rapidly due to national digitalisation reforms, increasing smartphone penetration, and growing public trust in online payments. Government initiatives such as the “Digital Uzbekistan – 2030” programme aim to modernize ICT infrastructure, stimulate e-commerce participation, and integrate SMEs into digital marketplaces (Abdullayev & Rustamov, 2022). Studies show that young people are at the forefront of this digital shift, using mobile

applications for shopping, banking, and entertainment more than any other demographic group (Akhmedov, 2021). Scholars examining the Uzbek context often highlight a combination of progress and barriers. For instance, Yuldashev and Khojiev (2022) find that while many businesses are adopting digital marketing tools, gaps remain in analytical skills, content creation, and user-centric approaches. Similarly, Turaev (2021) notes that although digital platforms are becoming more widespread, issues such as inconsistent logistics, low digital literacy among some population segments, and limited consumer protection regulations still affect user experience. However, existing research tends to focus on businesses rather than consumers. Few studies examine how users—especially students—interpret marketing strategies within local digital platforms. Moreover, there is limited analysis of specific platforms such as Uzum, despite its widespread adoption and influence. This limits scholarly understanding of how platform marketing strategies align with user expectations in the Uzbek digital ecosystem.

While platforms like Uzum, ZoodMall, and Alifshop have become central to Uzbekistan’s e-commerce landscape, academic research on user interaction within these apps remains scarce. Most available studies analyze macro trends such as market growth, fintech adoption, or policy frameworks (Akhmedov, 2021; Abdullayev & Rustamov, 2022).

This creates a critical gap: the absence of user-centred perspectives on the effectiveness and perception of marketing strategies. Another gap relates to methodology. Existing work is predominantly descriptive or quantitative, relying on surveys or secondary data.

However, the subjective interpretation of digital marketing strategies—how users feel, think, and react—requires qualitative exploration. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that qualitative methods are well suited to understanding complex personal experiences, making them appropriate for studying digital behaviour among young consumers. Given that students represent a major user base for Uzum and are frequent digital consumers, their perceptions can reveal important insights about what enhances or diminishes engagement with platform-based marketing. Their views can also inform more culturally relevant and user-sensitive marketing strategies.

Overall, the literature reveals strong theoretical foundations on digital marketing and user engagement, as well as growing research on Uzbekistan’s digital transformation. However, significant gaps remain concerning:

- How Uzbek students perceive online marketing strategies on local digital platforms.
- How marketing features on apps like Uzum shape engagement, trust and purchase behaviour.
- User-centred qualitative insights that go beyond surface-level trends.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of students using the Uzum application, offering an empirically grounded understanding of how young consumers engage with online marketing in Uzbekistan’s evolving digital economy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology section outlines the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical approach used in the study. Because the research aims to explore how Uzbek university students engage with and perceive online marketing strategies on the Uzum application, a qualitative approach is adopted. This section explains the rationale for this choice, describes the methods used, and critically evaluates their strengths and limitations.

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to understanding complex social phenomena that cannot be captured through numerical measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The core objective of this study is not to measure the frequency of user behaviours but to uncover how students interpret online marketing strategies, how they navigate promotional features on Uzum, and what personal, cultural, or contextual factors influence their engagement. A phenomenological orientation guides the research approach, focusing on the lived

experiences of participants as they interact with the Uzum application. Phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their everyday experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This approach aligns with the study’s aim to explore students’ interpretations, attitudes, and emotional responses to marketing strategies such as push notifications, personalised recommendations, in-app advertisements, and promotional campaigns. The qualitative approach is justified because students’ perceptions are shaped by nuanced factors—trust, convenience, digital literacy, economic constraints, and personal preferences—that cannot be adequately captured through structured surveys. Moreover, the exploratory nature of the research demands a method that values depth over breadth.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who have experience using the Uzum application. This ensures that participants can provide relevant insights into the research questions. The sample consists of 10–15 university students from different higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. Diversity in age, gender, study major, and frequency of app usage was sought to capture a variety of perspectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow flexibility to explore emerging themes while ensuring consistency across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability.

The interview guide included open-ended questions focused on:

- Students’ general experience with the Uzum application
- Their exposure to and interpretation of online marketing strategies
- Perceived usefulness, credibility, and intrusiveness of promotional features
- Factors influencing trust and purchasing decisions
- Challenges or frustrations encountered in the app

Semi-structured interviews are appropriate because they encourage participants to speak freely while allowing the researcher to probe deeper when needed.

All participants provided informed consent before the interview. Privacy and confidentiality were ensured by anonymizing transcripts and removing identifiable information. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any moment.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, a well-established method for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved several iterative stages, beginning with familiarization through repeated reading of the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants’ experiences. From there, meaningful segments of text were coded to capture key perceptions, behaviours, and interpretations expressed by the students. These initial codes were then organised into broader categories, forming the basis for emerging themes related to trust, usability, personalisation, and perceived value. The themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the dataset as a whole, refined where necessary, and clearly defined to capture their conceptual essence. The final stage involved writing the findings by integrating direct quotations from participants and connecting each theme to the central research questions. Thematic analysis was particularly suitable for this study because of its flexibility and its ability to uncover both explicit statements and deeper underlying meanings, making it an effective method for understanding how students perceive and engage with online marketing strategies within a digital platform context.

Each methodological decision in this study was informed by the exploratory nature of the research topic. The qualitative approach is justified because online marketing perceptions involve personal interpretations shaped by psychological, cultural, and contextual factors. Quantitative methods would not capture these subtleties. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to generate rich, detailed data. They allow participants to discuss experiences in their own words and enable the researcher to ask follow-up questions that reveal deeper insights. A quantitative survey might reach more respondents, but it would restrict the depth of responses and fail to uncover nuanced

motivations. Thematic analysis was selected because of its analytical flexibility and its suitability for identifying patterns in user experiences. It allows the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions and interpret how students construct meaning around the online marketing strategies they encounter.

However, the methodology has limitations. The sample size is small, which means the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of Uzbek students. Additionally, participants may provide socially desirable answers or recall only the most memorable experiences. Despite these limitations, the methodology remains appropriate because the study prioritizes depth and insight over generalizability. Overall, the methodological approach is coherent, well-justified, and aligned with the research aim of exploring how Uzbek students perceive and engage with online marketing strategies on the Uzum application.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with 12 university students in Uzbekistan (7 female, 5 male; ages 18–24). All participants were active users of the Uzum application and had interacted with at least one form of online marketing on the platform. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) perceived usefulness and convenience, (2) trust and credibility of marketing messages, (3) personalisation and relevance, and (4) user frustration and ad fatigue. Each theme is presented with supporting quotes and analytical interpretation.

Across interviews, participants consistently described Uzum’s marketing strategies—particularly push notifications and promotional banners—as useful sources of information about discounts, new products, or price drops. Many expressed appreciation for the app’s ability to simplify shopping by highlighting relevant deals.

Participants frequently explained that marketing features helped them make quicker decisions and compare prices. Several noted that the “flash sale” and “limited-time discount” promotions influenced their buying behaviour.

“Honestly, I like the notifications. When I see ‘50% off today only,’ I immediately check it. It saves time.” (Participant 3, Female, 21)

“Uzum’s discount banners are helpful. I don’t have to search too much; the app shows what’s trending.” (Participant 8, Male, 22)

However, while most viewed these features as convenient, a minority felt that some promotional messages were “too frequent” or “slightly pushy,” especially during holiday sale periods.

Table 1.

Summary of Participants’ Perceptions of Usefulness of Uzum’s Marketing Features

Category	Description	Number of Participants (n=12)	Example Participant Comments
Positive Perceptions	Marketing features are helpful, save time, highlight relevant discounts, and simplify decision-making.	8	“Notifications help me find discounts faster.”
Neutral Perceptions	Marketing is occasionally useful but not always relevant; participants use it selectively.	2	“Sometimes the banner is helpful, sometimes not.”
Negative Perceptions	Oversaturation of notifications; occasional mismatch between marketing messages and user needs.	2	“Too many messages — it gets annoying.”
Mixed Feelings	Participants appreciate discounts but dislike notification frequency.	3	“I like the deals, but the timing of notifications is bad.”

(Note: Some participants’ perceptions fall into more than one category; totals may exceed 12.)

Overall, the theme highlights that convenience and speed are primary motives driving student engagement, reinforcing global findings that young consumers value efficiency in digital shopping.

Trust emerged as a key factor influencing how students responded to Uzum’s marketing. Several participants reported confidence in the platform’s promotional messages, citing past positive experiences, reliable delivery, and price transparency.

“I trust Uzum more than other apps. If they say the price is discounted, it really is.”
(Participant 1, Male, 20)

Nonetheless, some participants expressed skepticism regarding the accuracy of certain product descriptions or the authenticity of seller-provided discounts. Students who had previously encountered misleading ads or low-quality products were more cautious.

“Sometimes the ads look too perfect, but when the product arrives, it’s different. So now I double-check everything.” (Participant 10, Female, 19)

Trust was closely linked to perceived platform quality. Participants who used Uzum frequently tended to trust its marketing more than occasional users.

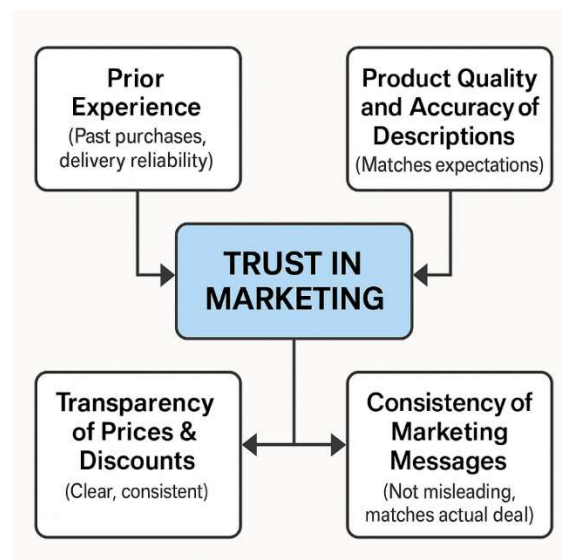


Figure 1. Factors Influencing Student Trust in Uzum Marketing

These findings demonstrate that trust is not static; rather, it develops through repeated interactions and past experiences with marketed products.

Another prominent theme was students’ sensitivity to whether online marketing messages were personally relevant. Many participants stated that personalised recommendations or tailored promotional messages increased engagement.

“When the app shows items related to what I searched before, that’s useful. I feel like it understands what I need.” (Participant 5, Female, 23)

Students appreciated personalised features such as “Recommended for you,” “Similar products,” and “Price drop on viewed items.” These tools made the shopping experience more intuitive and reduced search effort.

However, some participants questioned the accuracy of personalisation algorithms. When recommendations felt irrelevant or repetitive, participants reported lower engagement.

“Sometimes it shows things I never want to buy. Then I ignore it. Maybe the system doesn’t learn correctly.” (Participant 6, Male, 24)

A few participants also expressed minor privacy concerns, noting that the recommendation system occasionally felt “too predictive.”

Table 2.

Examples of Highly Relevant vs. Irrelevant Personalised Recommendations

Type of Recommendation	Description	Examples Mentioned by Participants	Perceived Outcome
Highly Relevant	Matches recent searches, browsing history, or price comparisons.	Electronics previously viewed, clothing items saved, textbooks searched for, kitchen accessories.	Increased engagement; more likely to click or purchase.
Moderately Relevant	Related to general interests but not recently searched.	Sports equipment, household items, popular snacks.	Occasional engagement; neutral reaction.
Irrelevant	Does not match interests, searches, or previous behaviour.	Baby products, automotive parts, luxury items outside student budgets.	Ignored; decreases trust in the recommendation algorithm.
Repetitive Recommendations	Same items shown repeatedly despite lack of interest.	Duplicate gadget suggestions, repeated fashion ads.	Causes annoyance; some participants disable recommendations.

This theme illustrates that personalisation enhances engagement only when users perceive the recommendations as meaningful and contextually appropriate.

While most students acknowledged the usefulness of online marketing on Uzum, many also reported experiencing ad fatigue due to frequent notifications or repetitive promotional content. Push notifications were the most commonly mentioned source of frustration.

“Sometimes I feel overwhelmed. Morning, afternoon, evening — too many notifications.”
 (Participant 2, Female, 20)

Some participants admitted to disabling notifications in response to excessive marketing. Others preferred fewer but higher-quality messages.

“If they reduce notifications and make them more specific, I would actually pay more attention.” (Participant 12, Male, 22)

Ad fatigue was also linked to seasonal sales periods, during which participants felt that marketing messages became “aggressive” or “annoying.”

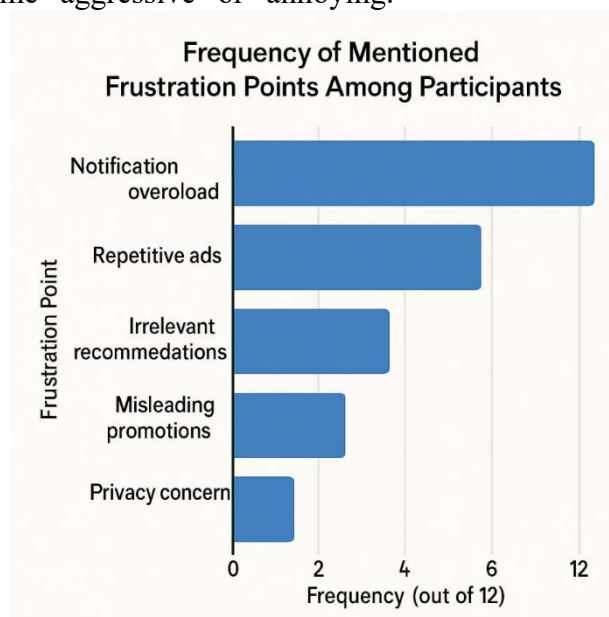


Figure 2. Frequency of Mentioned Frustration Points Among Participants

Overall, while marketing strategies generally enhanced user engagement, excessive messaging risked generating negative reactions that could reduce long-term loyalty.

Overall Patterns Across Themes

Taken together, the themes reveal a dynamic interplay between usefulness, trust, personalisation, and frustration. Students engage positively with online marketing when it is helpful, credible, and personalised—but disengage when marketing becomes intrusive or irrelevant. Notably:

Agreement: Nearly all participants appreciated discounts and time-saving promotional features.

Disagreement: Participants differed on whether notifications were useful or annoying.

Significant trend: More experienced users expressed greater trust and less skepticism.

Outlier cases: A few participants preferred minimal marketing but still used the app regularly.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how university students in Uzbekistan engage with and perceive online marketing strategies on the Uzum application, revealing a complex balance between convenience, trust, personalization, and frustration. The findings show that students generally value marketing features that save time, highlight relevant discounts, and enhance the shopping experience, while their trust in promotions depends largely on past experiences, transparency, and product quality. At the same time, excessive notifications, irrelevant recommendations, and repetitive advertisements can lead to disengagement or ad fatigue, reducing the effectiveness of Uzum’s marketing efforts. By illuminating these nuanced user perspectives, the study contributes meaningful insights into digital consumer behavior in Uzbekistan’s rapidly developing digital economy and highlights the importance of user-centered, context-sensitive marketing strategies for platforms seeking to maintain engagement and build long-term loyalty among young consumers.

Appendix A: Sample Interview Transcript

Participant: P3 (Female, 21 years old)

University: National University of Uzbekistan

Interview Type: Semi-structured

Date: [Insert Date]

Duration: 27 minutes

Interviewer:

Can you describe your overall experience using the Uzum application?

Participant P3:

I use Uzum quite often, maybe two or three times a week. For me, it’s convenient because the delivery is usually fast and the prices are reasonable. I like the layout of the app—it’s simple and not confusing.

Interviewer:

How do you feel about the marketing messages or promotions you see on Uzum?

Participant P3:

I actually like them. The notifications about discounts help me save time. For example, a few weeks ago they sent a “50% off kitchen items” message, and I checked it immediately. I didn’t plan to buy anything, but I found something useful and affordable.

Interviewer:

Do you always find these messages useful?

Participant P3:

Not always. Sometimes the notifications come too often, especially in the evening, and it becomes annoying. I understand they want to promote things, but I think they could reduce the frequency.

Interviewer:

What about personalized recommendations? Do they feel relevant to you?

Participant P3:

Most of the time, yes. If I search for something earlier, the app shows similar products the next day. It feels like the app remembers what I want. But sometimes it shows strange things—like baby products—I have never searched for those. When that happens, I just scroll past it.

Interviewer:

How much do you trust the information shown in promotions or ads on Uzum?

Participant P3:

I trust it more than other apps. If they say something is discounted, it is usually true. But one time, I ordered something that looked different in the picture. Since then, I always check the reviews before buying.

Interviewer:

Have you ever felt that any of the marketing strategies were misleading?

Participant P3:

Maybe a couple of times. Sometimes the product title will say “Best Seller” or “Top Choice,” but when you receive it, it feels normal, not special. So I’m careful, but overall, I think Uzum is honest compared to other platforms.

Interviewer:

What improvements would you suggest for Uzum’s marketing strategies?

Participant P3:

They should make the notifications smarter—maybe send fewer but more accurate ones. Also, sometimes they repeat the same offer too many times. If they personalise the messages better, I think it will be perfect.

Interviewer:

Is there anything else you want to add?

Participant P3:

I like the discounts. That’s why I keep using the app. If they keep improving and make the marketing more relevant, more students will use it too.

End of Transcript

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