

Digital Referral System and Consumer Acquisition, Engagement, and Loyalty of Selected Online Business Platforms: Inputs to Enhanced Strategies (Focus on Shopee, Lazada, and Temu)

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of the digital economy has transformed the way online business platforms attract and retain consumers. Digital referral systems have emerged as an effective marketing strategy that encourages existing users to recommend products and services to potential customers through incentive base programs. This study examines the relationship between digital referral systems and consumer acquisition, consumer engagement, and consumer loyalty among users of selected online business platforms, specifically Shoppee, Lazada, and Temu. The research evaluated digital referral systems in terms of incentive, and reward structure, ease of use, and the accessibility, social sharing features, tracking and analytical capabilities, and security and privacy of referral data. Consumer acquisition was assessed based on the reach of new customers, conversion of referred needs, brand awareness, cost efficiency, and referral influence on purchase decision. Consumer engagement was evaluated through interaction with referral content, frequency of participation, feedback activity, community involvement, and consistency of platform of usage, while consumer reality was measured through repeat purchase behavior, brand advocacy, emotional attachment, retention of referred customers, and switching intention.

A quantitative research design utilizing a structure survey questionnaire was employed to gather data from 377 respondents selected through purposive sampling. Statistical analysis revealed that digital referral system were High Evident across all measured dimensions. Furthermore, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between digital referral systems and consumer acquisition ($r=0.820$, $p<0.001$), and consumer engagement ($r=0.586$, $p<0.001$), and consumer reality ($r=0.544$, $p<0.001$). The findings demonstrate that well-designed referral systems contribute significantly to platform growth by attracting new customers, increasing user participation, and strengthening long term customer loyalty. The study recommends enhancing referral incentives, improving system accessibility and transparency, strengthening security measures, and integrating more engaging referral strategies to maximize the effectiveness of digital referral programs within online business platforms.

Keywords: Digital Referral Systems, Consumer Acquisition, Consumer Engagement, Consumer Loyalty, Online

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of the Digital economy has significantly transformed the way businesses attract, engage, and retain consumers. As online business platforms continue to expand, digital referral systems have become one of the most Effective marketing strategies for increasing customer acquisition and strengthening long-term consumer relationships. Digital referral systems enable existing users to recommend products or services to potential customers through digital platforms, often by providing incentives or rewards to both the referrer and the referred user. According to (kumar et 2021), referral systems utilize customers recommendations through digital technologies, such as mobile applications and social media platforms, to create organic network effects that contribute to sustainable business growth. As competition among online platforms continues to intensify, organization increasingly rely on referral marketing because of its ability to expand market reach while reducing customer acquisition costs.

Globally, several companies have demonstrated the effectiveness of digital referral systems in accelerating business growth. Companies such as a Uber, Airbnb, and Dropbox have successfully implemented referral programs that reward existing customers for inviting new users. Uber provides rides credits to both referrers and referred customers Airbnb rewards existing customers for inviting new users, Uber provides rides credit to both referrers and referred customers, Airbnb rewards guests and hosts through its referrers and referred customers Airbnb. Rewards guests and hosts through its "Refer-a-Friend" program, while Dropbox offers additional cloud storage space for every successful referral. These referral initiatives have contributed significantly to customer acquisition, increased user registration, and strengthened long-term

customers engagement, such examples demonstrate how digital referral systems have transformed traditional word of mouth marketing into customers-driven strategies capable of sustaining business growth across various industries.

In the Philippine context, the growing popularity of e-commerce, financial technology, and mobile internet usage has further increased the relevance of digital referral systems. Major online platforms such as Shopee, Lazada, Grab, GCash, and Maya have incorporated referral programs into their marketing strategies by offering promotional vouchers, digital credits, cashback incentives, and reward points to encourage users to invite new customers. These initiatives have enabled businesses to expand their customer base while adapting global referral marketing practices to the purchasing behaviors of Filipino consumers, who actively engage in online shopping and social media activities. Consequently, digital referral systems have become an important component of customer acquisition and retention strategies among online business platforms operating in the Philippines.

In view of these developments, this study aimed to determine the relationship between digital referral systems and consumer acquisition, consumer engagement, and consumer loyalty among users of selected online business platforms, specifically Shopee, Lazada, and Temu. The study examined digital referral systems in terms of incentive and reward structure, ease of use and accessibility, social sharing features, tracking and analytic capabilities, and security and privacy of referral data. It further evaluated consumer acquisition, consumer engagement, and consumer loyalty based on identified indicators and determined whether significant relationships existed between the variables. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for online business platforms in developing enhanced referral strategies that strengthen customer relationships, improve platform competitiveness, and support sustainable growth within the Philippine e-commerce industries.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

In view of these developments, this study aimed to determine the relationship between digital referral systems and consumer acquisition, consumer engagement, and consumer loyalty among users of selected online business platforms, specifically Shopee, Lazada, and Temu. The study examined digital referral systems in terms of incentive and reward structure, ease of use accessibility, social sharing, features, tracking and analytic capabilities, and security privacy of referral data. It further evaluated consumer acquisition, consumer engagement, and consumer loyalty based on identified indicators and determined whether significant relationship existed between variables. The findings of the study are expected to provide valuable insights for online business platforms in developing enhanced referral strategies that strengthen customer relationships, improve platform competitiveness, and support sustainable growth within the Philippine e-commerce industry.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at the Eulogio “Amang” Rodriguez Institute of Science and Technology (EARIST), at Nagtahan, Sampaloc Manila, Philippines. The respondents were students from College of Business and Public Administration (CBPA) who actively use online business platforms such as Shopee, Lazada, and Temu. The Institution was selected because its students regularly engage in online shopping and are familiar with digital referral systems, making them appropriate participants for the study.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents consisted of 377 students enrolled in the College of Business and Public Administration of EARIST. They were selected based on their experience in using online shopping platforms that offer digital referral programs. The respondents represented different age groups, genders, educational leaves, shopping frequencies, and preferred digital platforms, providing a broad perspective regarding the effectiveness of digital referral systems in influencing consumer behavior.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling to select respondents who met the inclusion criteria. Participants were chosen because they had prior experience using digital referral systems offered by online business platforms particularly Shopee, Lazada, and Temu. This non-probability sampling technique ensured that the respondents possessed sufficient knowledge and experience to provide reliable responses regarding digital referral programs and their influence on consumer acquisition, engagement, and loyalty.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was structured survey questionnaire, adapted from related studies and validated by experts. It was divided into sections to measure the profile of respondents, digital referral systems, consumer acquisition,

consumer engagement and loyalty. The instrument uses a 5-point Likert scale to gather accurate and consistent responses from the participants.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researchers secured the necessary approval to conduct the study. The survey questionnaire was then distributed to qualified respondents who met the established criteria. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and were requested to answer the questionnaire honestly based on their personal experiences using digital referral systems. After retrieving the completed questionnaires, the responses were checked for completeness, organized, encoded, and prepared for statistical analysis.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical tools, frequency counts and percentages were used to describe the demographic profile of the respondents. Weighted Mean was utilized to determine the level of implementation of digital referral systems and the respondents' assessment of consumer acquisition, consumer engagement, and consumer loyalty. To determine the relationship between digital referral systems and the three dependent variables, The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (Pearson r) was employed at a 0.05 level of significance. The computed correlation coefficients and corresponding p -values served as the basis for accepting or rejecting the null hypothesis.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The researchers observed ethical principles throughout the conduct of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose and objectives of the research before completing the survey questionnaire, participants were assured that all information gathered would be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. No identifying personal information was disclosed, and respondents were free to decline or withdraw from participation at any stage without any consequences. The researchers also ensured that the collected data were handled responsibly, interpreted objectively, and reported honestly to preserve the integrity and credibility of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Sample Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that the implementation of Digital Referral Systems among the selected online business platforms was highly evident across all dimensions, including incentive and reward structure (WM=4.47), ease of use and accessibility (WM=4.51), social sharing features (WM=4.54), tracking and analytic capabilities (WM=4.42), and security and privacy of referral data (WM=4.39). Among these dimensions, social sharing features obtained the highest weighted mean, while security and privacy of referral data received the lowest, although both remained within the "Highly Evident" descriptive level. These results indicate that respondents generally perceived the referral systems of Shopee, Lazada, and Temu as effective, accessible, transparent, and reliable in supporting referral activities.

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of digital referral systems is primarily influenced by features that promote convenience, encourage user participation, and establish consumer trust. The high rating for social sharing features indicates that integrating referral links with social media platforms enables users to share recommendations more efficiently, thereby expanding customer reach. Likewise, the high ratings for ease of use and incentive structure demonstrate that consumers are more likely to participate in referral programs when the process is simple and the rewards are perceived as valuable. Although security and privacy received the lowest mean among the dimensions, its "Highly Evident" rating indicates that respondents remain confident in the platforms' ability to protect personal information and referral data.

These findings support the studies of (Bacay et al. 2022, Grajo 2024, Hochstein et al. 2023, Soria 2024, and Adikari 2025), which collectively emphasized that attractive incentives, user-friendly platform design, transparent referral monitoring, social media integration, and data security significantly influence consumers' willingness to participate in digital referral programs. The results therefore suggest that strengthening these dimensions can further improve the effectiveness of digital referral systems and contribute to sustainable customer acquisition, engagement, and loyalty among online business platforms.

3.2 Sample Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that respondents perceived Digital Referral Systems as having a highly evident contribution to consumer acquisition across all assessed dimensions, namely reach of new customers through referrals (WM=4.49), conversion rate of referred leads (WM=4.46), brand awareness generated by referrals (WM=4.44), cost efficiency of customer acquisition (WM=4.47), and referral program influence on purchase decision (WM=4.47). Among these dimensions, the reach of new customers through referrals obtained the highest weighted mean, while brand awareness generated by referrals received the lowest weighted mean. Nevertheless, all dimensions were interpreted as Highly Evident,

indicating that respondents consistently recognized referral systems as an effective strategy for attracting potential customers and supporting the growth of online business platforms.

The results suggested that digital referral systems play a vital role in expanding the customer base of online business platforms. The high rating for the reach of new customers indicates that referral programs effectively encourage existing users to introduce products and services to their family members, friends, and social networks, resulting in increased platform visibility and customer acquisition. Similarly, the high ratings for conversion rate and purchase decision imply that recommendations from trusted individuals encourage prospective customers not only to register but also to complete actual purchases. This demonstrates that referral marketing extends beyond increasing platform exposure by influencing consumers throughout the purchasing process, from initial awareness to transaction completion. Furthermore, the findings on cost efficiency indicate that respondents perceive referral marketing as a practical and economical alternative to traditional advertising because it relies on satisfied users to promote the platform through authentic recommendations. Although brand awareness obtained the lowest weighted mean among the dimensions, its highly evident rating indicates that referral activities remain an important mechanism for strengthening brand recognition and maintaining a competitive presence within the digital marketplace.

These findings are consistent with the studies cited in the present research. (Roelens 2018) emphasized that referral marketing is an effective customer acquisition strategy because it utilizes existing consumers to expand brand reach through trusted recommendations while minimizing marketing costs. Likewise, (Barokah 2023) explained that referral marketing increases the likelihood of converting prospective customers into active users by strengthening consumer trust and encouraging continued platform engagement. (Soria 2024) further highlighted that digital sharing and social media interactions significantly improve brand awareness by increasing the visibility of products and services among online communities. Moreover, (Chouhan 2024) argued that consumers tend to rely on authentic recommendations from peers when making purchasing decisions, reinforcing the influence of referral programs on consumer behavior. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Digital Referral Systems serve as an effective marketing strategy for improving customer acquisition by expanding market reach, enhancing brand recognition, increasing customer conversion, reducing acquisition costs, and influencing purchase decisions. Consequently, continuously improving referral incentives, sharing mechanisms, and user experience may further strengthen the ability of online business platforms to attract and acquire new customers in an increasingly competitive e-commerce environment.

3.3 Sample Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that respondents assessed Digital Referral Systems as having a highly evident influence on consumer engagement across all evaluated dimensions, namely interaction with referral content (WM=4.34), frequency of referral participation (WM=4.34), online reviews and feedback activity (WM=4.30), community involvement through referral links (WM=4.32), and consistency in digital platform usage (WM=4.38). Among these dimensions, consistency in digital platform usage obtained the highest weighted mean, while online reviews and feedback activity recorded the lowest weighted mean. Despite these variations, all dimensions were interpreted as Highly Evident, indicating that respondents consistently recognized Digital Referral Systems as effective in promoting active participation and sustained interaction within online business platforms.

The findings suggest that referral systems contribute significantly to strengthening consumer engagement by encouraging users to remain active and involved throughout their interaction with online platforms. The highest-rated dimension, consistency in digital platform usage, indicates that referral incentives motivate users to revisit and continuously use the platform, thereby increasing user retention and participation over time. Likewise, the high ratings for interaction with referral content and frequency of referral participation demonstrate that consumers actively respond to referral-related promotions, share referral links, and invite others to join digital platforms. These behaviors reflect the effectiveness of referral systems in fostering continuous communication between consumers and online businesses. Furthermore, respondents' positive assessment of community involvement implies that referral activities encourage social interaction among users, creating a stronger sense of belonging within the platform. Although online reviews and feedback activity received the lowest weighted mean among the dimensions, its highly evident rating indicates that users are still willing to share their experiences and provide valuable feedback, which contributes to improving platform credibility and customer trust. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Digital Referral Systems not only stimulate user participation but also promote long-term engagement by encouraging meaningful interactions, repeated platform usage, and collaborative online communities.

These findings are supported by the literature cited in the study. (Soria 2024) emphasized that social media interactions and user-generated content significantly influence consumer engagement by encouraging active participation and facilitating communication among users. Similarly, (Roelens 2018) explained that referral marketing serves as an effective form of digital word-of-mouth that motivates consumers to participate continuously through sharing and invitation activities. (Ng Kok Wah 2025) further highlighted that positive customer experiences encourage users to provide reviews

and feedback, strengthening trust and enhancing platform performance. Moreover, (Nuseir et al 2023) asserted that digital marketing strategies, including referral systems, contribute to sustained customer engagement by improving user experience and encouraging long-term interaction with online platforms. Taken together, these findings indicate that Digital Referral Systems are effective in fostering consumer engagement by increasing user participation, promoting social interaction, encouraging feedback generation, and sustaining continuous platform usage. Therefore, online business platforms should continue enhancing referral features that encourage meaningful consumer interaction and strengthen long-term customer relationships.

3.4 Sample Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that respondents assessed Digital Referral Systems as having a highly evident influence on consumer loyalty across all evaluated dimensions, namely repeat purchase behavior (WM=4.41), willingness to advocate or recommend the brand (WM=4.37), emotional attachment to the brand (WM=4.29), retention of referred customers (WM=4.32), and switching intention to competing brands (WM=4.37). Among these dimensions, repeat purchase behavior obtained the highest weighted mean, while emotional attachment to the brand received the lowest weighted mean. Despite these differences, all dimensions were interpreted as Highly Evident, indicating that respondents consistently perceived referral programs as effective in fostering customer loyalty and encouraging long-term relationships with online business platforms.

The findings suggest that Digital Referral Systems contribute significantly to strengthening consumer loyalty by encouraging repeat purchases, increasing customer retention, and motivating consumers to recommend online platforms to others. The highest-rated dimension, repeat purchase behavior, indicates that consumers are more likely to continue purchasing from platforms that offer rewarding and well-managed referral programs. Similarly, the high ratings for willingness to advocate or recommend the brand demonstrate that satisfied users voluntarily share referral links and recommend platforms within their social networks, thereby reinforcing brand credibility and expanding customer reach. Referral incentives also encourage customers to remain loyal by reducing their intention to switch to competing platforms while fostering continuous engagement through attractive rewards and positive user experiences. Although emotional attachment to the brand received the lowest weighted mean, its highly evident rating indicates that consumers still develop favorable emotional connections with platforms that consistently provide satisfying referral experiences. These findings highlight that Digital Referral Systems influence not only transactional behavior but also long-term customer commitment and brand preference.

The findings are consistent with the studies cited in the present research. (Ng Kok Wah 2025) emphasized that positive customer experiences and perceived value significantly enhance repurchase intention, customer retention, and brand advocacy, resulting in stronger consumer loyalty. Likewise, (Vu 2023) explained that customer satisfaction and rewarding experiences strengthen consumers' emotional attachment to digital platforms, encouraging them to maintain long-term relationships with the brand. These findings imply that Digital Referral Systems serve as an effective customer retention strategy by motivating consumers to continue using online business platforms, recommend them to others, and remain loyal despite the availability of competing alternatives. Consequently, continuously improving referral incentives, customer experience, and platform reliability may further strengthen consumer loyalty and promote sustainable business growth within the digital marketplace.

3.5 Relationship Between Digital Referral Systems and Consumer Acquisition, Consumer Engagement, and Consumer Loyalty

The correlation analysis revealed that Digital Referral Systems have statistically significant positive relationships with Consumer Acquisition, Consumer Engagement, and Consumer Loyalty. Specifically, Digital Referral Systems demonstrated a very strong positive relationship with Consumer Acquisition ($r=0.820$, $p<0.001$), a moderate positive relationship with Consumer Engagement ($r=0.586$, $p<0.001$), and a moderate positive relationship with Consumer Loyalty ($r=0.544$, $p<0.001$). Since all computed p-values were less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypotheses were rejected, confirming that Digital Referral Systems are significantly associated with the three consumer behavior variables examined in this study.

The results indicate that improvements in Digital Referral Systems are associated with corresponding improvements in consumer acquisition, engagement, and loyalty among users of online business platforms. The strongest relationship was observed with Consumer Acquisition, suggesting that referral systems are particularly effective in attracting new customers through trusted recommendations, referral incentives, and social sharing mechanisms. Meanwhile, the moderate positive relationships with Consumer Engagement and Consumer Loyalty indicate that referral systems also encourage consumers to participate actively in referral activities, interact with referral content, provide feedback, continue purchasing, and maintain long-term relationships with online business platforms. These findings demonstrate that Digital Referral Systems influence consumer behavior beyond initial customer acquisition by supporting continuous interaction and sustained customer loyalty.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The findings of the study demonstrate that Digital Referral Systems play a significant role in enhancing the performance of online business platforms in terms of consumer acquisition, engagement, and loyalty. The respondents perceived the implementation of Digital Referral Systems as Highly Evident across all assessed dimensions, including incentive and reward structure, ease of use and accessibility, social sharing features, tracking and analytic capabilities, and security and privacy of referral data. Likewise, consumer acquisition, engagement, and loyalty were all assessed as Highly Evident, indicating that referral systems effectively encourage users to participate in referral activities, interact with online platforms, and maintain long-term relationships with brands. Furthermore, the correlation analysis confirmed that Digital Referral Systems have significant positive relationships with consumer acquisition, consumer engagement, and consumer loyalty, with the strongest relationship observed in consumer acquisition. These findings emphasize that Digital Referral Systems have become an effective digital marketing strategy that not only attracts new customers but also strengthens customer participation and promotes long-term loyalty among users of online business platforms.

Based on these findings, online business platforms should continuously improve their Digital Referral Systems by providing more attractive and competitive referral incentives, simplifying referral processes, enhancing social sharing features, and strengthening tracking, analytic, and security mechanisms. These improvements may encourage greater user participation, increase customer acquisition, and sustain consumer engagement and loyalty over time. In addition, businesses should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their referral programs by considering consumer feedback and adapting their strategies to changing market trends and technological developments. Future researchers are encouraged to examine Digital Referral Systems in different industries, business sectors, and consumer populations while exploring additional variables that may influence referral effectiveness, such as consumer trust, perceived value, digital innovation, and emerging marketing technologies.

Despite the significant findings, the study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The research focused only on selected online business platforms, namely Shopee, Lazada, and Temu, and gathered data from a specific group of respondents within the selected research locale. Consequently, the findings may not be fully generalize to all e-commerce platforms or consumer populations. Moreover, the study examined only the relationship between Digital Referral Systems and consumer acquisition, engagement, and loyalty using the variables included in the conceptual framework. Other factors that may influence consumer behavior, such as customer satisfaction, brand image, digital trust, technological readiness, and cultural differences, were beyond the scope of the study. Future research may address these limitations by including more diverse respondents, expanding the research setting, and incorporating additional variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Digital Referral Systems in the evolving digital marketplace.

Compliance with ethical standards

The researchers conducted the study in accordance with institutional ethical standards and accepted principles of research integrity. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all respondents were informed of the purpose, procedures, and significance of the research before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic and research purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality throughout the conduct of the study. The researchers declare that there were no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, implementation, analysis, or reporting of the research findings. All authors made substantial contributions to the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, and preparation of the manuscript, and all have approved the final version for publication. Furthermore, the manuscript is the original work of the researchers, has not been previously published or submitted elsewhere for publication, and all sources of information have been properly acknowledged and cited in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines. Copyright of the work remains with the authors, subject to the policies and requirements of the publishing institution or journal.

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