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The Effect of Inbound Marketing on Online Customer Engagement: An Empirical Study in Retail Stores of Basrah

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Abstract---*In today's digital world, marketers are facing challenges that make them care about customer engagement more than ever. The technological developments and the wide spread of the Internet have enhanced the role that customers play in creating value for the marketer, which has gone beyond buying to online interaction and engagement behaviors. Therefore, the study sought to examine the effect of inbound marketing as an approach described as the most effective in the digital age on encouraging online customer engagement. Therefore, the study sought to examine and diagnose the nature of the influence of inbound marketing as an approach described as the most effective in the digital age to encouraging online customer engagement. In the field axis, the study relied on a quantitative approach by targeting retail stores in Basra Governorate – Iraq, A sample of (237) retailers was surveyed using the random sampling method. The results showed that there is a narrow interest of retailers in the inbound marketing approach in enhancing online customer engagement, which focuses mainly on the presence of those retailers on social media networks.*
Keywords---*blogs marketing, engines marketing, inbound marketing, online customer engagement, social media networks*

Introduction

The technology and communications revolution has changed the social lifestyles of customers and the methods marketers use to communicate with the target audience (Allesant et al., 2016). In fact, the developments in the field of digital communication technologies represented by social networking and smartphone applications have taken up a large space in the daily lives of most customers (Dwivedi et al., 2020). So, relying on the traditional promotional tools that were commonly used in the past such as print ads, cold calls, and trade fairs is not enough to draw customers' attention towards marketing messages. Frankly, today we live in the middle of a world in which customers are strongly attracted to the Internet, it provides them with a sea of diverse information in various fields (Breto et al., 2012), this is what made these customers enjoy greater levels of awareness than ever before and they are able to educate themselves before engaging in the procurement process (Weerasinghe, 2018). Evidently, marketing at the present time is witnessing a decisive moment in the adoption of digital theoretical foundations and approaches that impose a restructuring of its activities, which orientations beyond commercial aspects towards embracing new approaches capable of communicating with digital customers (Sánchez-Teba et al., 2020). For this reason, the marketer's job in light of the current complex marketing scene is no longer confined to seeking to find or reach potential customers, but rather to helping those customers find his. Hence, inbound marketing is an effective approach to attract potential customers in the new digital marketing paradigm (Miller, 2012).

In the past two decades, the expansion of the use of the Internet in various areas of life and the increase in the number of users of social media networks contributed to the decline in the importance of traditional communication media Such as television, newspapers, and radio.... etc. which are becoming less efficient and more costly (Bezhovski, 2015). It is known that traditional communication media, also known as external marketing techniques, are payment media that take a unilateral path in conveying messages from marketers to customers (Hoogma, 2015; Kouchesfahani et al., 2019). Hence, these Traditional media achieve a weak level in customer interaction with

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marketing messages (Halligan & Shah, 2010). Contrasts, the inbound marketing approach focuses on the use of digital technologies in marketing communications, which are considered as withdrawal media in marketing communications, in which the customer often initiates the purchasing initiative by visiting the marketer's website (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). More precisely, the inbound marketing approach goes beyond the aspect of unilateral communications directed to customers and waiting for their reactions, it adopts the idea that providing information-rich content about the products and brands that the customer is looking for will be enough to attract visitors to the marketer's website (Luca, 2019). In addition, inbound marketing focuses on the importance of converting customers into promoters by creating a wonderful experience that the customer shares with friends and relatives via the Internet (Kahra, 2016).

The digital revolution brought about a clear change in the culture and buying behaviors of many customers (Baltes, 2016), and it opened new horizons for those customers to be active contributors and influencers in a wide range of marketing functions (Harmeling et al., 2017). In other words, the interactive digital media supported the culture of empowering customers to express their views and ideas and share their purchasing experiences with others. On this point, marketing studies have confirmed that a customer's buying behavior is influenced by the way other customers interact with marketers' content and offerings on web and digital platforms (Chuang, 2020). Due to the importance and prominent role that customers play in creating value through their online behaviors, the efforts of marketers expanded to manage and direct online customer Engagement (Beckers et al., 2018). Hereby, those marketers sought to search for ways through which to create interactive customers rather than simply encouraging customers to buy (Roberts & Alpert, 2010). To date, technologies and platforms related to the inbound approach have proven to be an effective and powerful marketing and advertising options in the digital age, as they provide a great opportunity to monitor and track customer engagement. Thus, enabling marketers to measure the success of online marketing efforts (Pontier et al., 2016; Assiriyage, 2018).

The problem of the study

Obviously, a review of the marketing literature reveals that online customer Engagement represents a critical variable in achieving reaching a wide audience of customers. Despite the prominent position that customer engagement enjoys as a research priority in the digital age. However, employing the right approach to customer engagement still poses a difficult challenge to the efforts of internet marketers (Busalim et al., 2019). Indeed, there is a knowledge gap regarding how marketers build customer interaction with the content of their online marketing offerings (Marbach et al., 2016). In this context, the opinions of researchers and scholars go that customer engagement will not be achieved without properly designed interaction platforms that provide him with a compelling experience talking with his friends and relatives (Hammed et al., 2018), this is what requires marketers to adopt inbound marketing channels that will enhance and support online customer engagement (Kahra, 2016). In blunt words, the marketers who do not accept changes in customer behavior and the business environment greatly risk being left behind (Harvidsson & Smith, 2017). Therefore, the study sought to shed light on one of the critical marketing variables in the current business environment, which is the online customer engagement, then test the strength of the effect of inbound marketing platforms on online customer Engagement among retail stores in the governorates of Basra - Iraq.

The study questions

The study attempts, through its axes, to answer the following questions:

Q1: To what extent do retailers in Basra Governorate realize the importance of online customer engagement and their interest in this engagement in supporting marketing and advertising efforts?

Q2: To what extent do retailers in Basra Governorate employ inbound marketing platforms to stimulate online customer Engagement and convert them from visitors to customers and promoters?

Literature Review

Inbound marketing
The concept of inbound marketing and its importance

The concept of inbound marketing, since its inception in 2005, has received a clear interest in the academic and business fields (Assiriyage, 2018), as it reflected the modern perspective of Internet marketing, with its based strategies and practices focused on developing the quality of information content to attract customers to the marketer's site/page on the online and converting them into actual customers as well as promoters (Kauhaniemi, 2015; Bezhovski, 2015). In fact, the concept of inbound marketing is not limited to attracting customers by providing them with appropriate educational content on the marketer's website, but also extends to the context of emphasizing value creation for customers throughout the buying journey (Silva, 2018). In general, the inbound Approach embodies one of the forms of marketing that requires highly accurate targeting of customers and communicating with them in a more specialized way through information that they see as useful, as well as experiences that make them feel happy (Dakouan, 2019). According to Pateman & Holt (2011), the concept of inbound marketing expresses a group of activities associated with attracting and sharing customers for their wonderful experiences with the marketer. Miller (2012), defined inbound marketing as the approach in which the marketer focuses on helping and guiding customers who have the desire or are looking to buy to access his website, and then transform the early and achieved awareness of those customers into a preference for the brand and a strong desire to a Product purchase. In a holistic view, Desai (2019), describes inbound marketing as "an integrated approach to attract and delight potential customers and convert them into promoters using content marketing".

The digital communication technologies that have remarkably invaded our lives have led to the development and release of inbound marketing initiatives as an effective approach to achieving success in the current business environment, as this approach targets customers in their virtual world associated with the use of the Internet and social media in which they spend most of their time (Silva, 2018). Inbound marketing is the modern approach to marketing management, Thus, like any revolution that can bring with it the winds of changes, inbound marketing is moving away from the traditional expensive advertising campaigns that focus on raining customers with annoying and disruptive advertising messages in order to attract those customers or sell something to them (Swieczak, 2014). Notably, inbound marketing stems from the idea that posting attractive content of useful information on the online marketer's page will achieve the desired attraction of customers' interests, and this, in turn, will prompt customers who are looking for that information to visit the marketer's site/ page on online (Bellefeuille, 2013). The results of marketing studies and research indicate that the inbound approach contributes to reducing the cost of acquiring new customers compared to traditional marketing methods that achieve a weak response from customers (Assiriyage, 2018), expanding the customer base by attracting large traffic to the online marketer's site, creating the foundations for strong and long-term relationships with customers through interactive communication systems via the Internet that directly respond to customers, the ability to track the behaviors of visitors and customers and measure the level of success in marketing efforts, encouraging online customer engagement (Douglas, 2018).

Inbound marketing channel

Nowadays, customers use the internet to collect information about brands and products as well as shop through platforms/channels (search engines, blogs, and social media networks):

Search engines marketing

The thirst and clear awareness of information and its importance in our world have led to the development of what is known as search engines, particularly that information today is a force in building the value chain for any business, so search engines still represent an effective marketing tool used by many marketers (Bhandari & Bansal, 2018). Even with the development of digital media, search engines have a prominent position and importance within inbound marketing platforms or channels (Sindlhauser, 2015), as engines such as (Google, Yahoo) represent the destination at which a large number of customers go-to for ordering information and shopping (Chotikitpat et al., 2015). Currently, search engines receive many searches about different products and brands. Today, many customers prefer to sit at home or behind offices and search for information through these engines instead of going to the market or moving to a trade fair, as these customers find that obtaining information through search engines is easier than asking questions and listening to a salesperson (Halligan & Shah, 2014). Moreover, search engines provide a

huge amount of free information to customers about products that help in choosing the right marketer and brand (Kannan & Li, 2017). Till now, the presence of search engines is a major pillar in the success of inbound marketing initiatives, the ability of the marketer's website depends on search engine optimization and the ease of customers finding the required content (Erdmann & Ponzoa, 2021; Bailey et al., 2021; Simon & Tossan, 2018).

Blogs marketing

The second place where customers can gather information about different products and brands is in the blogosphere (Halligan & Shah, 2010). Simply, a blog is defined as "pages on the internet displaying different content belonging to the blogger in different formats, including text, images, and videos archived in a reverse chronological manner" (Talola, 2013). In the field of marketing, the blog serves as a comprehensive repository of information that describes the exact nature of the marketing activity of a particular marketer or company (Ahuja & Medury, 2010). More precisely, blogging is a method used by the marketer to display content on the Internet in a way that allows interested customers to easily access it (Hotoleanu & Parkkinen, 2017), as it allows customers to Educate themselves with more information about products, give comments and share similar opinions and interests with others. Therefore, a blog is a great channel to communicate and interact with the target audience online (Stenius, 2015). Blog marketing involves a wide range of content offered by a marketer or blogger in Form of advertisements, comments, recommendations (Edilbaeva, 2014), it is an essential pillar within the inbound initiatives that enable the marketer to achieve strong attraction to customers who are looking for information that enhances their purchasing decisions (Brown, 2015). Although blogs can achieve large engagement in customer comments, the most important positive point produced by the blog is the valuable knowledge associated with the opinions and reactions of customers, which can be used to improve marketing decisions and performance (Sinha et al., 2011).

Social media networks marketing

Social media networks such as (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram ... etc.) embody the cornerstone in implementing the inbound marketing approach (Baltes, 2016), these networks are defined as "a set of systems and applications that allow users to create, exchange, and share different contents with friends through the Internet (Solve & Ojelling, 2017). The use of social media networks focused at the beginning of their inception as virtual communities to communicate and exchange information between people with similar interests, but it quickly revolutionized the field of communication between humans through its characteristics of global communication and open over time (Kauhaniemi, 2015). Over time, social networks have become attracting a beyond imagination number of users on our planet. This encouraged marketers to seek to transfer their business practices to these networks. Especially, these networks allowed marketers to implement their marketing campaigns at a relatively low cost (Dakouan, 2019). Regardless of the popularity of social media networks, the success of using these networks cannot be achieved without marketers realizing the fact that they are two-way communication media. Consequently, customer inquiries and inquiries should receive a lot of attention from these marketers (Kotamaki, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2016).

Inbound marketing methodology

In pursuit of a clear perception of how the inbound marketing approach works, it is important to understand the methodology or philosophy of this marketing approach in attracting visitors to the marketer's website and converting them from strangers to actual customers who are happy with the promotion of that marketer (see Figure 1). The inbound marketing methodology is summarized through the following steps:

- Step 1: Attract
  The starting point in inbound marketing lies in the marketer's interest and endeavor towards attracting visitors to his website by providing content that the customer can view as valuable and useful (Castevens, 2015).
- Step 2: Convert
  The later step begins after new visitors gather initial information about the product or brand through the marketer's website or page on the Internet, it is to convert those stranger visitors into potential customers who are willing and ready to buy (Bui, 2020). In this step, the marketer should seek to obtain broader information about what the visitors are looking for, but here the marketer needs to provide those visitors with something valuable, this valuable thing can come in the form of white papers, pictures, or educational videos about the product (Kelly & Kvarfordt, 2016).

- Step3: Close
  The third stage in the inbound marketing methodology involves making use of the information obtained in the previous stage for the purpose of converting potential customers into actual customers who are ready to buy (Nieminen, 2017). Although the completion of the purchase process is not what is primarily targeted by inbound marketing, but in this step, the marketer's focus is on enhancing the feeling of potential customers that it is time to make a purchase decision (Sánchez-Teba et al., 2020). In this context, customer registration points and marketing automation systems can play a vital role in completing the purchase process (Harder & Canning, 2017).
- Step 4: Delight
  The last step in inbound marketing revolves around the most difficult task for all marketers, which is converting the customer into a promoter (Bezhovski, 2015). In fact, the recommendation related to a product or visiting a specific marketer's website constitutes the main goal of the inbound initiatives, but that goal will not be achieved without a customer who feels happy through his purchasing experience (Bui, 2020). In addition, the aspects of recognizing the importance of customers and the speed of answering their questions, opinion polls, and continuous measurement of their reactions are important tools in customer happiness and Delight (Brown, 2015; Desai & Solanki, 2020).

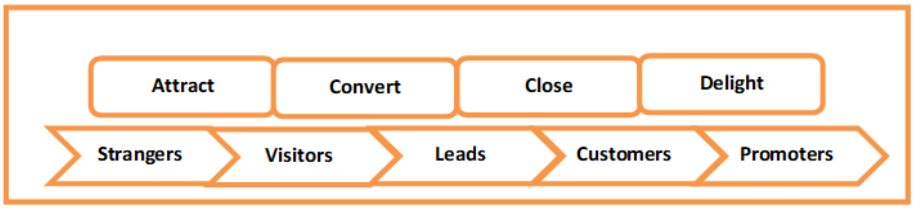

Figure 1. Inbound marketing methodology
Source: Silva (2018)

Online customer engagement
The concept of online customer engagement and its importance

The developments in marketing during the past three decades brought about radical shifts in the marketers' orientations towards the target market, as these changes gave greater attention to interacting with customers and building Better relationships with them, this has contributed to marketers shifting from focusing on transactional marketing to adopting concepts such as customer engagement as a key dimension in implementing the relationship marketing approach. (Islam et al., 2019). In general, the concept of customer engagement is based on the fact that customers' contribution to creating and adding value to marketers and brands is not limited to the purchase process, but that those customers can contribute through their interactive behaviors to support the efforts of marketers (El Sheikh, 2019). Although engagement is a somewhat complex concept since it is related to research fields in psychology and sociology that have focused on the study and interpretation of interactive behavior with others in society (Lopes, 2020). Nonetheless, customer engagement occupied a wide horizon in marketing research in recent years (Hollebeek et al., 2019), specifically after technological innovations provided new entrances to interact with customers (Poorrezaei, 2016). The researchers used the term customer engagement with different names, such as consumer engagement (Vivek, 2009; Brodie et al., 2013), customer engagement behaviors. (Romero & Okazaki, 2015; Chiang et al., 2017), consumer brand engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2016), but customer engagement is the most commonly used label (Kumar et al., 2010; Pap et al., 2017). The difference in nomenclature may be due to the fact that customer engagement is a relatively developing concept, so there is also a difference in its definition among researchers (Mahobia et al., 2016).

According to Doom et al. (2010), customer engagement refers to "customer interaction behaviors directed towards a specific marketer or brand as a result of the buying experience, which takes a different form, the most important of which is the word of mouth, blogging, and recommendation to others". While Brodie et al. (2011), defined customer engagement as "the customer's psychological state related to the interaction and experience achieved towards a particular marketer or brand". From a holistic point of view, Hao, (2020); Busaliam et al. (2019), agree that customer engagement is a concept that describes "psychological and behavioral dimensions of interactions, the buying experience, and the customer's relationship with a marketer or a brand". In fact, the

customer's engagement can occur in the online purchasing environment and the offline purchasing environment, but the customer's engagement in the internet-connected purchasing environment is more important because the internet environment provides more options for customers to express their purchasing experiences to others (Greve, 2014; Naumann et al., 2020). Despite the difference in research contributions about the definition of customer engagement and the environment in which it can occur, academia shows that such engagement is an important variable for building the foundations of strong customer relationships (Mpinganjira, 2016). Moreover, online customer engagement achieves positive outcomes that go beyond the traditional buying role that those customers play to be advocates for marketers through positive electronic word of mouth, likes, and store recommendations (Thakur, 2018; Sashi, 2012; Gupta, 2012). Accordingly, marketers should strive to take full advantage of all forms of customer communication and give it great attention as an opportunity to build lasting interactive relationships with the customer

Dimensions of online customer engagement

It is known that online customer engagement occurs when the customer contacts the marketer or in the case of the customer's communication with other friends through platforms related to the use of the Internet (Weerasinghe, 2018). According to the model (4Is) proposed by (Haven, 2007), online customer engagement includes four dimensions that are summarized as follows:

Involvement

The involvement dimension reflects the starting point and initial visit that the customer makes to the marketer's store or web page, the time that customer spends on the store's website, the pages or publications he has viewed and downloaded content from images and videos about the products and brands offered.

Interaction

Compared with the previous dimension, the interaction gives a clearer picture of the customer's interests in the offers that the marketer offers on the web store, which includes the customer's request for additional information about the product or the brand, asking about the price, additional services related to the product.... etc.

Intimacy

The Intimacy within the dimensions of online customer engagement refers to the feelings of closeness and affection that the customer has, positive or negative, towards the marketer, which is generated through the interaction and the buying experience.

Influence

The influence dimension may constitute a clear picture of the behavioral aspect of online customer engagement, which takes different forms, such as recommending a product, inviting others to follow or visit the marketer's website, sharing videos and images on the marketer's web store with friends.

Hypothesis development

The visit of the customer to the marketer's website or page on the Internet represents a "crucial moment" that a retailer can exploit to attract customers and interact with them more deeply (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016), the visit and interaction of customers with the marketer depends on the presence of something valuable on his online store that will be a means of attracting them. (Dissanayake et al., 2019). In this field, inbound marketing is a new and effective approach that marketers can employ in the marketing environment connected to the Internet, as it emphasizes the importance of building inbound initiatives in building relationships with customers (Stenius, 2015). From a business perspective, inbound marketing begins with marketers creating useful content that provides answers to customer questions and presenting it through their stores on the web or other digital channels (Swieczak, 2012), this content will be the main focus in the inbound marketing methodology to attract visitors to the marketer's site on The Internet (Kee & Yazdanifard, 2015). As the marketer has to add value during the customers' buying journey, this

will inevitably produce high levels of customer engagement to experience it with others through different behaviors (Yasin et al., 2019). Hence, the first hypothesis states:

H1*: Inbound marketing has a significant effect on online customer engagement in retail stores.*

In the context of the relationship between search engine marketing and online customer engagement, Lieu (2018), pointed out that search engines constitute vital channels in digital marketing, that these engines or sites, if properly employed by marketers, will be effective channels for generating potential customers and encouraging them to participate. Wiggins (2019), found that marketers' websites have contributed significantly to improving customer visit rates, the average time spent browsing the site. According to Anderl (2014), the retailers can now choose between a number of available digital channels, but search engines remain effective marketing channels. Dwivedi et al. (2020), revealed that Search engines nowadays receive more than (40,000) queries and searches every second, as the most famous site, Google meets with approximately (11.3) million queries and searches every hour. Although these statistics are difficult to understand, they are clear evidence of the importance of these Sites in shaping the purchasing decisions of customers and their engagement. Therefore, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H2*: Search engines marketing has a significant effect on online customer engagement in retail stores.*

With regard to the relationship between blogs marketing and online customer engagement, Ahuja & Medury (2010), stated that blogs represent one of the successful marketing methods that have proven effective in building relationships with customers and encouraging them to make comments engagement. Likewise, Sinha et al. (2011), reported that Blogs Marketing has a strong ability to encourage customers to participate through their comments on marketer posts hosted by the blog. Verma (2014), emphasized that marketing blogs are created to achieve different goals, but the main purpose of these blogs remains to build customer trust and good relationships that contribute to motivating customers to share their feelings and emotions with others. Hughes et al. (2019), pointed out that blogs marketing is an important channel to support marketers' efforts and promotional campaigns implemented through various platforms, the blogs contribute to enhancing the interactions and customer's engagement who turn into real advocates for the marketer. Therefore, the third hypothesis is:

H3*: blogs marketing has a significant effect on online customer engagement in retail stores.*

The most obvious form of the relationship between inbound marketing and online customer engagement is evident through social media networks. In this context, Jayasingh (2019), explained that social media networks occupy an advanced position in the orientations of promotional and network marketers. The role represents important channels for customer engagement. Lee et al. (2018), indicated that the presence of persuasive marketing content in the marketer's store within social networks inevitably has a positive impact on customer engagement. Moreover, the results of several empirical studies support the strong effect of social media networks on the level of customer engagement (Reitz, 2012; Cuillilier, 2016; Solem & Pedersen, 2016; Farook & Abeysekara, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017; Jayasingh, 2019; Devereux et al., 2019; Brandao et al., 2019; Jibril et al., 2019; Kujur & Singh, 2020; Shawky et al., 2020). Hence, the fourth proposed hypothesis states the following:

H4*: Social media network marketing has a significant effect on online customer engagement in retail stores. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model in the current study and proposed hypotheses about the relationship between inbound marketing and online customer engagement.*

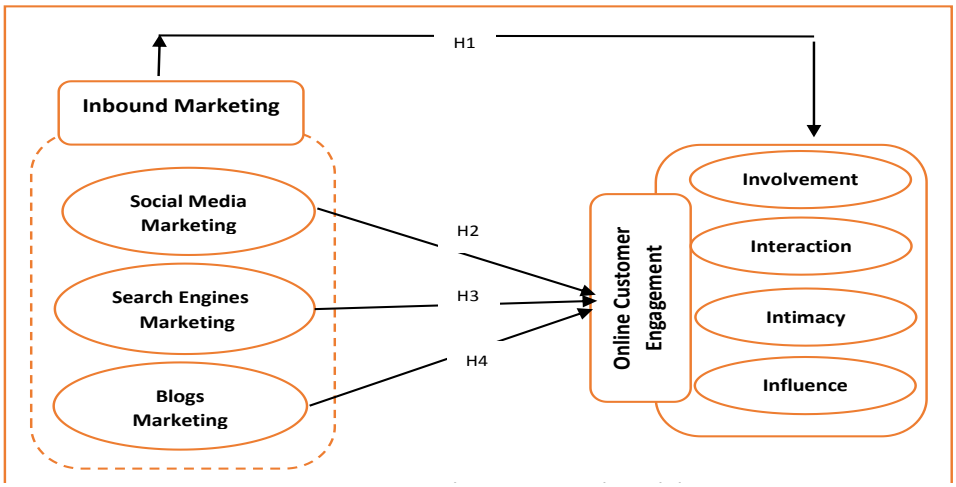

Figure 2. The conceptual model

Methodology

Study design and sample

The study took a quantitative research approach in testing the effect of inbound marketing and online customer engagement from the point of view of retailers in Basra Governorate - Iraq, as retail stores in Basra Governorate - Iraq were targeted to know the levels of these stores' employment of inbound marketing platforms in stimulating customer engagement and conversion from visitors to customers and promoters. A sample of (237) retailers was surveyed using the random sampling method. Table (1) shows the demographic characteristics of the retailers who were included in the survey.

Table 1
Demographic profile of the respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	215	91%
	Female	22	9%
Age	20-30 Years	56	24%
	31-40 Years	97	41%
	> 41 Years	84	35%
Education Level	High School Certificate	8	3%
	Diploma	17	7%
	Bachelor's Degree	213	90%
Sales Experience	<1 year	32	14%
	1-5 years	56	24%
	6-10 years	64	27%
	11-15 years	37	15%
	> 15 Years	48	20%

n = 237, Sources: Authors' survey.

Data collection tool

To collect data, a three-part questionnaire was used, the first part included the demographic characteristics of retailers, the second part included questions related to measuring inbound marketing, and the third part included

questions related to measuring online customer engagement. The fields for answering the questions in the questionnaire were designed according to the Likert scale (Appendix A). The study was based on designing the items of scales for variables that were adopted according to the previous literature, as the questions related to inbound marketing were taken from (Brown, 2015). While items used to measure online customer engagement from (Haven, 2007).

Statistical tools and techniques

The data collected from the field of study was analyzed and the results were extracted through the use of a program (Spss).

Analysis and Findings

Reliability & descriptive analysis

Before testing the validity of the proposed hypotheses in the conceptual model, the study used Cronbach's alpha as an important measure to determine the internal consistency (reliability) between the questionnaire items and to know the level of stability of the respondents' answers to the questions contained in it. Table 2 shows the results reached with regard to the reliability test for the variables of the current study, it is noted from the mentioned table that the highest value of alpha was recorded by the social networking marketing platform (0.896), while the lowest value of alpha was achieved through the Interaction dimension (0.809). The reliability test shows that all values extracted are greater than 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). Consequently, the values that were reached in the Cronbach's alpha test prove that there is a high consistency between the measures of the study tool (questionnaire) (Agnihotri, 2020; Manullang, 2021; Putra & Darma, 2020).

The mean and standard deviation were used as important scales in statistics to show the direction of the answers of the study sample. Table 2 shows that inbound marketing achieved a (mean= 2.75, standard deviation=.861), this means that the answers of retailers of the study sample towards the employment of inbound marketing channels were somewhat positive. At the level of the sub-dimensions of inbound marketing, social media networking marketing achieved the highest (mean= 3.05, standard deviation= .809), while blogs marketing achieved the lowest (mean= 2.57, standard deviation= .988). Whilst, the online customer engagement achieved the (mean= 2.68, standard deviation= .954), this means that the responses of the retailers were somewhat positive. At the level of the sub-dimensions of online customer engagement, intimacy was recorded as the highest (mean= 2.87, standard deviation= .941). While the Involvement record has the lowest value in the mentioned scales (mean= 2.55, standard deviation= .939).

Table 2
Results of Reliability Test and descriptive statistics

Constructs	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation
Independent Variable: Inbound Marketing		0.810	2.75	.861
1. Search Engines Marketing	3	0.826	2.63	.875
2. Blogs Marketing	3	0.817	2.57	.988
3. Social Media Networks Marketing	3	0.896	3.05	.809
Dependent Variable: online Customer Engagement		0.816	2.68	.954
4. Involvement	3	0.846	2.55	.939
5. Interaction	3	0.809	2.72	.982
6. Intimacy	3	0.834	2.87	.941
7. Influence	3	0.811	2.61	.922

Source: Survey Data

Correlation analysis

The results of the Pearson correlation reveal that there is a moderate positive relationship with inbound marketing with online customer engagement (r = .432**, p < .01), as shown in Table 3. At the level of the sub-dimensions of inbound marketing, social media network marketing has an important relationship within Dimensions of inbound marketing with online customer engagement (r = .344**, p <.01). Respectively, search engine marketing has a moderate positive correlation with online customer engagement (r = .267**, p < .01), while blogs Marketing has a weak positive correlation with online customer engagement (r = .178**, p < .01).

Table 3
Values of Person's correlation analysis

Variables	Values
Inbound Marketing	.432**
Search Engines Marketing	.267**
Blogs Marketing	.178**
Social Media Networks marketing	.344**

Hypotheses testing

Table 4 presents the results of hypothesis tests using linear regression analysis. It is inferred from the mentioned table that inbound marketing has a moderate positive effect on online customer engagement in the retail stores under study (β = .516, R2 = .37, T calculated= 15.417, T tabulated = 3.223), this supports H1. At the level of the sub-dimensions of inbound marketing, social media Network marketing had the largest effect on online customer engagement (β = .374, T calculated= 12.545), the "R2" shows that social media is able to explain (18%) of the variance in online customer engagement, which supports H4. Whereas, search engine marketing, which was also found to be an important predictor of online customer engagement (β = .313, T calculated= 10.508), the "R2" shows that social media networks are able to explain (12%) of the variance in online customer engagement, which supports H2. Moreover, blogs marketing was found to have a weak positive effect of online customer engagement (β = .516, R2 = .06, T calculated = 5.859), this supports H3.

Table 4
Results of regression analysis

Independent variables	β	R2	T	Hypothesis
Inbound Marketing	.516	.37	15.417	H1- Accepted
Search Engines Marketing	.313	.12	10.508	H2- Accepted
Blogs Marketing	.210	.06	5.859	H3- Accepted
Social Media Networks marketing	.374	.18	13.545	H4- Accepted

Note. p<0.01.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The widespread use of the Internet and the invasion of modern technology for a large part of the lives of most customers have contributed to making large-scale changes in the field of marketing and communication with the public. The current business environment reveals that the focus and efforts of marketers in marketing communications have moved away from traditional means of communication towards embracing digital media. Principally, the digital revolution has changed the perception that marketers see customers as passive recipients of marketing offers into positive recipients with extensive knowledge. Indeed, those customers became active contributors and participants in creating value for the marketer through their online behaviors, this in turn forced marketers to leave traditional one-way communication media that proved weak in creating customer interests toward adopting interactive digital media. Therefore, the study sought to explore the nature of the influence relationship between the employments of retailers in Basra Governorate - Iraq for the inbound marketing approach in encouraging online customer engagement. The results revealed an important influence of inbound marketing on online customer engagement. Likewise, the results obtained from exploring the effect of inbound marketing channels

on online customer engagement have been accepted with different degrees of effect strength, Social media networks had the greatest impact on online customer engagement. While, there was a weak positive impact from search engines and blogs on that engagement. Based on the results extracted in the current study, it is inferred that there is a limited recognition by the retailers who were surveyed regarding online customer engagement and its importance in acquiring and expanding the customer base. In addition, there is a narrow interest in the inbound marketing approach in enhancing online customer engagement, where this narrow scope focused on the presence of marketers on social networks (Wang, 2020; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Oh et al., 2017; Megargel et al., 2018).

Based on what was confirmed by the marketing literature related to inbound marketing and online customer engagement as essential variables to chart the success of marketers' efforts in a time when customers have become more educated, the study recommended that retail marketers should pay more attention to inbound marketing techniques as powerful interactive channels to reach higher levels of online customer engagement. In this aspect, those marketers should realize that inbound marketing is not only a purchase-oriented method, but also an integrated approach aimed at transforming stranger visitors into actual customers and promoters by creating and adding value to them along the buying journey. More precisely, the presence of marketers on the Internet is not enough to target the customer's engagement, as it is necessary for them to add and modify the content on their store websites/pages on the Internet in a way that provides a satisfactory experience and enough space for the customer to encourage him to share his experience with friends. Meanwhile, marketers should strive to choose an integrated mix of Internet channels or platforms in which customers spend most of their time, including social networks, search engines, blogs. Not to mention that marketers must take into account a critical factor in the success of Internet marketing, which is finding a human face that enhances the customer's confidence about the presence of a real marketer standing behind that page or site. Besides, retailers must consider every visitor on their online store pages as a potential customer. Hence, his inquiries should be taken with sufficient attention and answered in a timely manner.

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Appendix-A

(Questionnaire Items)

5-point Likert scale from (1) strongly disagree to Strong Agree (5)

Inbound Marketing (IM) *, *adopted from the Bowrn. (2015)*
(i). **Search Engines Marketing**
The store owns a website on search engines such as (Google, Yahoo).
The store is keen on continuous search engine improvement.
The Keywords are carefully chosen around the terms that users search on the web.
(ii). **Blogs Marketing**
The store realizes that the blog is a great way to attract new visitors.
The store blog conveys a clear picture of its marketing activity.
The store blog provides educational content that talks to customers and answers their questions.
(iii). **Social Media Networks Marketing**
There is a clear perception of the importance of social media in increasing the number of store customers.
The store is keen to put a human face into its social media usage.
The store employs social media as a tool for customer service.
Online Customer Engagement (OCM) **, *adopted from the Haven. (2007)*
(iv). **Involvement**
The online store platforms record large traffic from visitors.
Visitors spend long sessions on the platforms of the online store.
Landing pages on online store platforms show a high view rate.
(v). **Interaction**
The online store platforms receive many requests to buy products or view catalogs.
The Online store platforms indicate a wide audience of followers.
The online store platforms reveal high download rates for posted videos and products images.
(vi). **Intimacy**
The content posted on the online store platforms is liked by potential visitors or customers.
The Potential customers often post positive comments about the content of the online store platforms.
The potential customers express positive emotions in their opinions and discussions within the platforms of the online store.
(vii). **Influence**
The (net promoter) score reveals customers' willingness to recommend our products to other people.
The Customers send invitations to friends, family and acquaintances to like the online store pages
The online store platforms record repurchases orders from many customers.

* Independent Variable (IM)

** Dependent Variable (OCE)