Individual research paper

The Influence of Demographic Factors on Consumer Information-Seeking and Assessment Methods in SMEs

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of demographic variables—namely age, gender, educational attainment, employment status, and nationality—on the ways consumers seek and evaluate information related to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Employing a quantitative research methodology, data were gathered from 200 participants via an online survey aimed at assessing perceptions of the credibility of various communication channels utilized by SMEs. The results indicate that demographic factors play a significant role in shaping consumers' preferences for information sources, revealing marked differences in credibility evaluations among distinct demographic groups. This research highlights the necessity of customizing marketing approaches to address the varied requirements of consumers, ultimately equipping SMEs with practical insights to bolster consumer trust and engagement in a progressively digital marketplace.

Keywords: *SMEs, Demographic Factors, Information Credibility, Communication Channels, Trustworthiness*

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital environment, SMEs encounter the significant challenge of engaging consumers who utilize a variety of methods to seek and evaluate information. Factors such as age, gender, educational background, employment status, and nationality substantially influence consumer behavior, particularly regarding the ways in which individuals collect and assess information about products and services. As consumers increasingly refine their information-seeking processes, it becomes imperative for SMEs to comprehend these demographic influences to effectively connect with their intended audiences.

This study explores the impact of demographic factors on consumer information-seeking behaviors and the credibility evaluations of different communication channels. By analyzing the preferences and perceptions of trust among various consumer groups, the research aims to equip SMEs with critical insights for crafting customized marketing strategies that appeal to a wide range of demographic segments. The findings not only enhance the existing body of knowledge on consumer behavior but also provide actionable recommendations for SMEs aiming to improve their marketing efficacy and foster enduring customer relationships.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The rapidly evolving landscape of information technology has transformed how consumers seek and assess information, particularly when it comes to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Understanding how demographic factors influence these behaviours is essential for SMEs aiming to tailor their strategies to meet the needs of diverse consumer groups. This literature review focuses on the impact of age, gender, and education, as they have been identified as significant predictors of entrepreneurial intent and consumer decision-making behaviour (Hatak et al. (2015); Smith et al. (2016) ;Yukongdi and Lopa (2017))

2.2. Demographic Factors Influencing Consumer Information-Seeking Behaviour

Consumer information-seeking behaviour has long been a topic of interest in marketing research. According to Kiel and Layton (1981), information-seeking behaviour can be influenced by a variety of factors, including demographic variables. Their study highlighted that the way consumers gather information about products and services is not only a function of the available sources but also shaped by individual characteristics such as age, gender, and education. This early work laid the foundation for understanding how consumer behaviour could be segmented based on demographic profiles.

2.3. Age and Information-Seeking

Age has been consistently recognized as a significant factor influencing how consumers approach information-seeking activities. Research suggests that younger consumers are more likely to rely on digital sources for information, exhibiting higher levels of digital literacy and comfort with online tools Klein and Ford (2003). In contrast, older consumers tend to rely on more traditional sources of information, such as word-of-mouth or printed materials. This division is particularly relevant in the context of SMEs, where the integration of digital marketing strategies can vary widely.

2.4. Gender in Information Credibility and Assessment

Gender is another demographic factor that influences how consumers seek and assess information. Men and women often display different patterns in their information search processes, with men being more task-oriented and women more comprehensive in their search efforts. This aligns with findings from Klein and Ford (2003), who observed that gender differences impact the depth and breadth of information consumers seek, particularly in high-involvement purchases like automobiles.

Research also shows that gender plays a role in how consumers assess the credibility of information. Women, for instance, are more likely to rely on interpersonal sources and perceive them as more credible, while men tend to trust technical details and data-driven sources more readily Kiel and Layton (1981). For SMEs, this suggests that marketing efforts may need to adapt based on gendered preferences, emphasizing different types of credibility cues depending on the target demographic.

2.5. Education and Consumer Perception of Information Sources

Education is often linked to an individual's ability to critically assess information. Highly educated consumers tend to engage in

more extensive information searches and are more sceptical of the sources they encounter. According to Chatterjee et al. (2022), educated consumers are more adept at distinguishing between credible and non-credible sources, particularly in the digital space where misinformation can easily proliferate. SMEs, especially those operating in sectors with complex products or services, may find that highly educated consumers demand more detailed, transparent, and credible information to make informed decisions.

Furthermore, Smith et al. (2016) highlight that educational attainment not only influences information-seeking behaviour but also shapes entrepreneurial intention, with higher education levels being associated with a greater likelihood of entrepreneurial success. This correlation suggests that SMEs catering to a more educated customer base must prioritize accuracy, transparency, and detailed information in their communications.

2.6. Education and Consumer Perception of Information Sources

As consumer information-seeking behaviour shifts increasingly to digital platforms, the issue of credibility becomes paramount. Consumers are now inundated with information from a multitude of sources, including social media, websites, online reviews, and traditional media. Klein and Ford (2003) conducted an empirical study on how consumers search for information in the digital age, focusing on the pre-purchase search for automobiles. They found that the credibility of information sources plays a crucial role in consumer decision-making, particularly in digital environments where trust can be harder to establish.

In the context of SMEs, building credibility is essential for attracting and retaining customers. SMEs often operate with limited resources, making it imperative that their information sources—whether through websites, customer testimonials, or digital advertisements—are perceived as trustworthy. The demographic factors of the target audience further complicate this task, as different groups assess credibility through different lenses. For instance, younger consumers may place more trust in social proof, such as online reviews or influencer endorsements, while older consumers may rely on expert opinions or personal referrals.

2.7. Summary

The influence of demographic factors on consumer information-seeking and assessment methods is multifaceted. Age, gender, and education not only affect how consumers search for information but also how they evaluate its credibility. For SMEs, understanding these demographic nuances is crucial for crafting effective marketing strategies that resonate with their target audience. By acknowledging the varying preferences and behaviours of different demographic groups, SMEs can better position themselves to build trust and credibility in an increasingly competitive and digitized marketplace.

3. Hypotheses

3.1. General Hypothesis

- Null hypothesis H_0: Demographic factors such as age, gender, and education do not significantly influence how consumers seek and assess the credibility of information about SMEs.
- Alternative hypothesis H_1: Demographic factors such as age, gender, and education significantly influence how consumers seek and assess the credibility of information about SMEs, with variations in information sources, search behaviours, and credibility assessments based on these demographic characteristics.

3.2. Demographic types

Building on the existing literature, which indicates that certain demographic groups are more prone to expressing varying levels of trust towards companies, it is hypothesized that different demographic groups hold preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs. To more clearly highlight these differences, the hypotheses are divided into six subgroups for more precise analysis:

3.2.1. Age

- Null hypothesis H_{a0}: There is no significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on age.
- Alternative hypothesis H_{a1}: There is a significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on age.

3.2.2. Nationality

- Null hypothesis H_{n0}: There is no significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on nationality.
- Alternative hypothesis H_{n1}: There is a significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on nationality.

3.2.3. Education Level

- Null hypothesis $H_e l_0$: There is no significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on education level.
- Alternative hypothesis $H_e l_1$: There is a significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on education level.

3.2.4. Employment Status

- Null hypothesis $H_e s_0$: There is no significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on employment status.
- Alternative hypothesis $H_e s_1$: There is a significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on employment status.

3.2.5. Gender Identity

- Null hypothesis H_{g0}: There is no significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on gender identity.
- Alternative hypothesis H_{g1}: There is a significant difference in preferred methods of receiving information from SMEs based on gender identity.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to explore how demographic factors—such as age, gender identity, educational level, employment status and nationality—influence consumer perceptions of trustworthiness in SMEs. The survey was designed to measure trustworthiness perceptions using a structured 1-5 scale and was distributed via the Qualtrics platform in collaboration with Prolific. The study focuses on how individuals prefer to receive information from SMEs and their perception of the credibility of those channels.

4.2. Data Collection

Data was collected through an online survey that received 200 responses. The survey was designed by second-year students of the Applied Data Science and Artificial Intelligence course at Breda University of Applied Sciences and overseen by mentors. The questions aimed to capture key demographic details and respondents' trustworthiness perceptions of SMEs in different kinds of communication channels like websites, social media, email newsletters, SMS, phone calls, and in-person communication.

4.2.1. Trustworthiness Ratings

Respondents rated their perceived trustworthiness of SMEs on a scale from 1 to 5 with the question asked: "On a scale of 1 to 5, how credible do you find the following communication channels when receiving information from SMEs?". This question is broken down into specific channels like websites, social media, email newsletters, SMS, phone calls, and in-person communication. With these 6 different channels and 200 responses that gives us 1,200 data points.

4.2.2. Preferred communication channel

Respondents were asked a multiple-choice question which stated, what their preferred communication channel was. They were able to choose multiple ones with also being able to come up with their own.

4.2.3. Demographic Data

Respondents were asked to provide information on:

- **Age:** Captured in specific age ranges.
- **Nationality:** The survey captured respondents' nationality, with South African being the most common.
- **Educational Level:** Ranging from high school diploma to post-graduate qualifications.
- **Employment Status:** Participants indicated their employment status.
- **Gender Identity:** Options included male, female, and self-describe.

4.3. Sample demographics

- **Age:** Most respondents were aged 25-34. Due to a small sample size in the age groups of 55-64 and 65+, these were merged with the 45-54 group, resulting in a single "45+" category for analysis.
- **Nationality:** The survey attracted a diverse range of nationalities, with South African respondents making up the largest portion.
- **Educational Level:** The most common educational level among respondents was a bachelor's degree.
- **Employment Status:** Participants reported their employment status, and the most common industry of employment was working full-time.
- **Gender Identity:** Most respondents identified as female and male. Due to small sample sizes for non-binary/third-gender and "prefer not to say" categories, these groups were excluded from gender-based analysis.

4.4. Survey Instrument

The survey was designed with closed-ended questions (Likert scales and multiple-choice) to facilitate quantitative analysis, along with open-ended options for qualitative insights. The questions aligned with the literature on consumer trust, demographic influences, and SME engagement, ensuring relevance to the research objectives.

4.5. Sampling Technique

A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed via Prolific to gather responses quickly and efficiently. While this sampling method may limit the generalizability of the findings, it enabled the study to capture a diverse range of participants across different regions, industries, and demographic groups, offering meaningful insights into how these factors influence trust in SMEs.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Respondents voluntarily participated in the survey, providing informed consent before completing it. The survey was anonymous, and no personally identifiable information (PII) was collected. All data was stored securely and used solely for the purposes of this research, adhering to ethical guidelines regarding confidentiality and participant privacy.

4.7. Limitations of the Study

This research provides valuable insights into the influence of demographic factors on information-seeking behavior; however, certain limitations exist. One significant limitation is sampling bias due to the use of a convenience sampling method, which may result in a sample that does not fully represent the broader population. Additionally, the data relies on self-reported responses, making it susceptible to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in how respondents perceive their own behavior. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the data, collected at a single point in time, limits the ability to assess changes in behavior over time. Despite these limitations, the findings contribute meaningfully to the understanding of consumer behavior in SMEs, particularly concerning demographic factors such as age, gender, and education.

5. Analysis

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the sample's demographic data, including age, gender identity, education level, employment status and nationality, providing a comprehensive overview of the respondent characteristics.

5.2. Grouping and Categorization

To facilitate analysis, key demographic variables were categorized as follows: Age was grouped into four categories—18-24, 25-34, 35-44, and 45+. Due to limitations in sample size, gender identity was simplified to two categories: male and female. Education levels were organized based on the highest degree attained, including options such as bachelor's, high school, and master's degrees. Additionally, respondents were categorized according to their employment status and the industry in which they work. Lastly, nationalities were classified by continent to explore regional patterns in trustworthiness ratings.

5.3. Cross-Tabulation

Cross-tabulation was used to explore the relationship between demographic factors (age, gender identity, education, etc.) and SME trustworthiness for different communication channels. For example, the study examined whether younger consumers rated the use of websites as more trustworthy than older consumers or whether education level influenced perceptions of trust in person-to-person communication.

5.4. Correlation and Significance Testing

Pearson's chi-square tests were conducted to determine if there were statistically significant relationships between demographic factors and the credibility of different communication channels. This approach helped evaluate whether differences in trust ratings were driven by age, gender identity, education, employment status, or nationality.

6. Results

6.1. Preferred communication channels

For the larger sized table, see appendix.

Demographic Type	Demographic Groups	Top Preference	Second Preference	Third Preference
Age Group	18-24	Social Media (28.3%)	Email Newsletters (29.1%)	SMS (14.2%)
	25-34	Email Newsletters (33.5%)	Social Media (23.7%)	SMS (13.5%)
	35-44	Email Newsletters (30.9%)	Social Media (21.1%)	SMS (12.7%)
	45+	Email Newsletters (26.3%)	Website Notifications (14%)	SMS (14%)
Nationality	Africa	Email Newsletters (28%)	Social Media (23.3%)	SMS (17.1%)
	Asia	Email Newsletters (23.5%)	SMS (23.5%)	Social Media (17.6%)
	Europe	Email Newsletters (37.6%)	Social Media (25.3%)	Website Notifications (13%)
	North America	Email Newsletters (37.5%)	Website Notifications (12.5%)	Social Media (12.5%)
	South America	Email Newsletters (42.9%)	Social Media (14.3%)	Website Notifications / Face-to-Face
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	Email Newsletters (30.7%)	Social Media (24.7%)	SMS (12.7%)
	High School Diploma	Email Newsletters (36.6%)	Social Media (20.4%)	SMS (13.9%)
	Master's Degree	Email Newsletters (28%)	Social Media (24.3%)	SMS (16.8%)
	PhD or Higher	Email Newsletters (30.8%)	Website Notifications (15.4%)	Social Media (23%)
Employment Status	Working Full-Time	Email Newsletters (34.1%)	Social Media (21.2%)	SMS (14.3%)
	Working Part-Time	Social Media (28.9%)	Email Newsletters (27.8%)	SMS (13.4%)
	Student	Email Newsletters (29.2%)	Social Media (27.7%)	Website Notifications (18.5%)
	Unemployed	Social Media (24.4%)	Email Newsletters (22.2%)	SMS (15.6%)
Gender	Female	Email Newsletters (30.5%)	Social Media (22.5%)	SMS (15.2%)
	Male	Email Newsletters (33%)	Social Media (24.4%)	SMS (11.9%)

Figure 1. This figure displays how different demographic groups (age, gender, education, employment, and continent) prioritize communication channels like email, social media, and SMS. Key insights include younger audiences favoring social media and email, while older individuals prefer email newsletters.

6.1.1. Age Group

Younger audiences aged 18-24 are active users of social media, but they also engage significantly with email newsletters. Meanwhile, the 25-34 age group demonstrates a strong preference for email, highlighting its effectiveness for both professional and personal updates. In contrast, individuals aged 35-44 show a slight shift toward more formal communication channels, particularly favoring email. Finally, older individuals aged 45 and above tend to prefer email newsletters while also responding well to website notifications. (See figure 3 in appendix)

6.1.2. Nationality

Respondents from Africa exhibit a strong preference for email newsletters, reflecting a trend toward formal communication channels in that region. In contrast, Asian respondents demonstrate varied preferences, with a significant inclination toward both email and SMS. Meanwhile, European respondents consistently favor email across different demographics, and North American respondents show a similar trend, underscoring the importance of digital communication in these areas. Notably, South America displays an even more pronounced preference for email communication compared to other regions, emphasizing its effectiveness in connecting with audiences there. (See figure 4 in appendix)

6.1.3. Education Level

Highly educated individuals, those holding bachelor's degrees and above, continue to prefer email and social media for obtaining information, which indicates the reliability of these channels. In contrast, individuals with high school diplomas exhibit a strong preference for email, highlighting the ease of access and the significance of formal communication in their information-seeking behavior. Additionally, master's degree holders show a slight shift toward engaging with SMS and social media, suggesting an openness to diverse communication methods while still valuing traditional channels. (See figure 5 in appendix)

6.1.4. Employment Status

Students actively utilize both social media and email to gather information, reflecting their high level of digital engagement in job searches. Similarly, part-time workers engage actively with social media while also relying on email. Meanwhile, individuals who are unemployed and seeking work demonstrate a slightly higher preference for social media, likely driven by their increased job-related searches and the need to connect with potential employers and networks. (See figure 6 in appendix)

6.1.5. Gender Identity

Female respondents exhibit a preference for email newsletters, which is closely followed by engagement with social media and SMS channels. In contrast, male respondents show a stronger inclination toward email, with social media platforms being their next preferred option. This trend suggests that both genders maintain a consistent engagement with digital communication, although their preferences for specific channels may differ slightly. (See figure 7 in appendix)

6.2. Trustworthiness ratings for communication channels

For the larger sized table, see appendix

Demographic Factor	Credibility type	P-value	Hypothesis
Age Group	Websites	0.7270618540940078	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.6043540145396058	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.10781528308871931	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.11056944660311833	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.2927683658437539	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.8036856390611865	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Nationality	Websites	0.41899658063101347	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.033774253528641995	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.12657679375030087	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.002152776045008725	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.011507326327055324	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.7466069109322675	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Education Level	Websites	0.1772963255330469	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.4892850887810988	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.5738461120006133	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.8312588347046505	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.8459277283260525	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.8538198687720605	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Employment Status	Websites	0.8641430096233013	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.807308984008827	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.907256773385814	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.009605660125904077	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.13464738787818636	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.4576895151502368416	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Gender	Websites	0.15506206749916865	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.15722372107925017	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.009806082778921761	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.022797376747219034	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.8807240858120026	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.12072994558766396	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis

Figure 2. This table shows how age, nationality, education, employment status, and gender influence the perceived credibility of information sources about SMEs. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were found for nationality, employment status, and gender, suggesting these factors shape credibility assessments.

6.2.1. Demographic Factors and Credibility Types

For each demographic factor (Age, Nationality, Education Level, Employment Status, and Gender), different information sources were evaluated to understand if certain groups are more likely to consider specific sources credible when learning about SMEs.

6.2.2. P-Values and Hypothesis Decisions

The table includes p-values for each combination of demographic factor and information source. A p-value below 0.05 suggests that there is a statistically significant difference in credibility assessments for that source among different demographic groups.

The "Hypothesis" column states whether the null hypothesis was rejected or not. A "Reject the Null Hypothesis" decision implies that the demographic factor significantly influences the credibility perception of that information source.

6.2.3. Interpretation of Key Findings

Nationality: This factor showed significant influence on credibility perceptions for social media, SMS, and phone calls. For these sources, the null hypothesis was rejected, suggesting that people from different nationalities might view the credibility of these mediums differently.
Employment Status: The null hypothesis was rejected for SMS and Text Messages under Employment Status, indicating that employed and unemployed individuals might perceive the credibility of SMS differently.
Gender: SMS and Text Messages and Emails had p-values under 0.05, meaning that men and women (or other gender identities) could have different credibility perceptions for these mediums.

6.2.4. Implications of the Findings:

These findings support the alternative hypothesis H_1 that demographic factors can influence how people seek and assess information credibility about SMEs. Specifically:

Age and Education Level: For these factors, most p-values were above 0.05, indicating that these demographics did not significantly impact the preferred or trusted sources for information about SMEs.

Nationality, Employment Status, and Gender: These demographics demonstrated specific instances where preferences or credibility assessments differed, showing that SMEs may benefit from tailoring communication based on these characteristics.

7. Discussion

The results of this research highlight the critical influence of demographic factors on consumer information-seeking behaviors and their perceptions of credibility concerning SMEs. This analysis seeks to contextualize these findings within the existing body of literature and to elucidate their implications for SMEs.

7.1. Impact of Demographic Variables

The investigation demonstrated that factors such as **nationality, employment status, and gender** have a substantial impact on how consumers evaluate the credibility of different communication channels. This observation is consistent with prior studies that assert the importance of demographic variables in influencing consumer behavior (;Hatak et al. (2015) Smith et al. (2016)). The notable variations in credibility evaluations among different nationalities indicate that cultural perceptions play a significant role in the assessment of communication mediums. For example, differing levels of trust in social media, SMS, and phone calls suggest that SMEs must take cultural contexts into account when formulating their marketing strategies in diverse regions.

Conversely, age and educational attainment did not reveal significant variations in preferred communication channels. This outcome contrasts with some existing literature that posits younger, more educated consumers are more proficient in utilizing digital platforms Klein and Ford (2003). Nevertheless, this may reflect a trend toward a convergence in information-seeking behaviors across various age groups, as digital communication has become pervasive and vital for all segments of the population.

7.2. Gender Differences in Credibility Perception

The notable disparities in credibility evaluations related to gender, especially in the context of SMS and email communication, underscore the imperative for SMEs to customize their communication strategies. This observation aligns with previous research that indicates men and women frequently demonstrate divergent patterns in their information-seeking behaviors Kiel and Layton (1981). The inclination of female participants towards email newsletters and social media reflects their reliance on interpersonal sources, thereby highlighting the significance of relational trust in effective communication. In contrast, the preference of male participants for SMS and social media indicates a desire for rapid and efficient information dissemination.

7.3. Employment Status and Communication Preferences

The varying perceptions of SMS credibility contingent upon employment status imply that individuals who are employed may favor more formal communication channels, whereas those who are unemployed might gravitate towards platforms that facilitate immediate interaction and information access, such as social media. This observation mirrors broader consumer behavior trends, suggesting that individuals in the job market are likely to depend on platforms that offer real-time updates and engagement opportunities, reinforcing the idea that employment status significantly shapes communication preferences.

7.4. Implications for SMEs

In light of the differing perceptions of trustworthiness influenced by demographic factors, SMEs are required to modify their communication strategies accordingly. For instance, marketing initiatives should prioritize digital platforms that appeal to younger consumers, while simultaneously ensuring that older demographics receive information through more traditional channels. Additionally, a nuanced understanding of these demographic differences can enable SMEs to create targeted marketing campaigns that enhance trust and foster engagement.

The implications of this study also pertain to the allocation of marketing resources by SMEs. By recognizing the preferred communication channels of various demographic segments, SMEs can improve their outreach efforts and ensure that their messaging resonates more effectively with their intended audiences. Moreover, it is essential for SMEs to invest in the development of culturally sensitive communication strategies that acknowledge the diverse perceptions of credibility among consumers.

7.5. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, certain limitations warrant consideration. The use of convenience sampling may introduce biases that could compromise the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the dependence on self-reported data may lead to inaccuracies stemming from social desirability bias. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies that monitor shifts in consumer perceptions over time or utilize mixed methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations underlying communication preferences.

8. Conclusion

This research investigated the impact of demographic factors—specifically age, gender, education level, employment status, and nationality—on consumer behavior regarding information-seeking and the evaluation of credibility in relation to SMEs. The results indicate that demographic characteristics significantly influence consumers' preferences for information sources and their assessment of the reliability of different communication channels.

The study emphasizes that **nationality, employment status, and gender** are pivotal in determining credibility judgments, revealing that individuals from diverse backgrounds have varying perceptions of the trustworthiness of communication platforms, including social media, SMS, and email. This finding supports the alternative hypothesis that demographic factors are crucial in shaping consumer interactions with SMEs. Importantly, the pronounced differences in credibility perception between genders highlight the importance for SMEs to customize their communication approaches to align with the specific preferences of male and female consumers.

Interestingly, the research indicated that **age and education level** did not yield significant variations in preferred communication methods. This observation suggests a potential alignment in digital literacy and engagement across different age demographics, implying that consumers, irrespective of age, are increasingly turning to similar information sources in the digital era. This conclusion challenges some existing literature and underscores the necessity for further investigation into the changing dynamics of consumer behavior.

The ramifications of these findings are significant for SMEs. By gaining insights into the varying preferences and credibility perceptions across different demographic segments, SMEs can develop more impactful marketing strategies that align with the interests of their target demographics. Customizing communication methods not only builds trust but also improves customer engagement and satisfaction. While the insights derived from this study are valuable, it is crucial to recognize its limitations, such as the possibility of sampling bias and the dependence on self-reported data. Future investigations

could expand upon these findings by employing longitudinal studies or mixed method approaches to enhance the understanding of consumer behavior trends over time.

In summary, this research adds to the expanding literature on consumer behavior within SMEs, highlighting the critical role of demographic factors in influencing information-seeking behaviors and credibility evaluations. As the market landscape becomes increasingly digital and competitive, SMEs that adjust their strategies in accordance with the demographic intricacies of their consumer base will be more likely to achieve success.

9. Recommendation

SMEs should tailor their marketing strategies to align with the specific preferences of different demographic groups, utilizing the communication channels that resonate most with each segment. Incorporating credibility cues, such as customer testimonials and expert endorsements, can help build trust, particularly among those demographics that prioritize interpersonal validation.

Additionally, conducting periodic surveys to assess changing consumer preferences regarding communication channels and perceived credibility will ensure that SMEs remain aligned with market trends. It is also important to consider cultural differences when crafting marketing messages, especially in diverse markets, to enhance relatability and trust. Finally, emphasizing ethical marketing practices that respect consumer privacy and transparency will foster long-term relationships and brand loyalty.

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Appendix

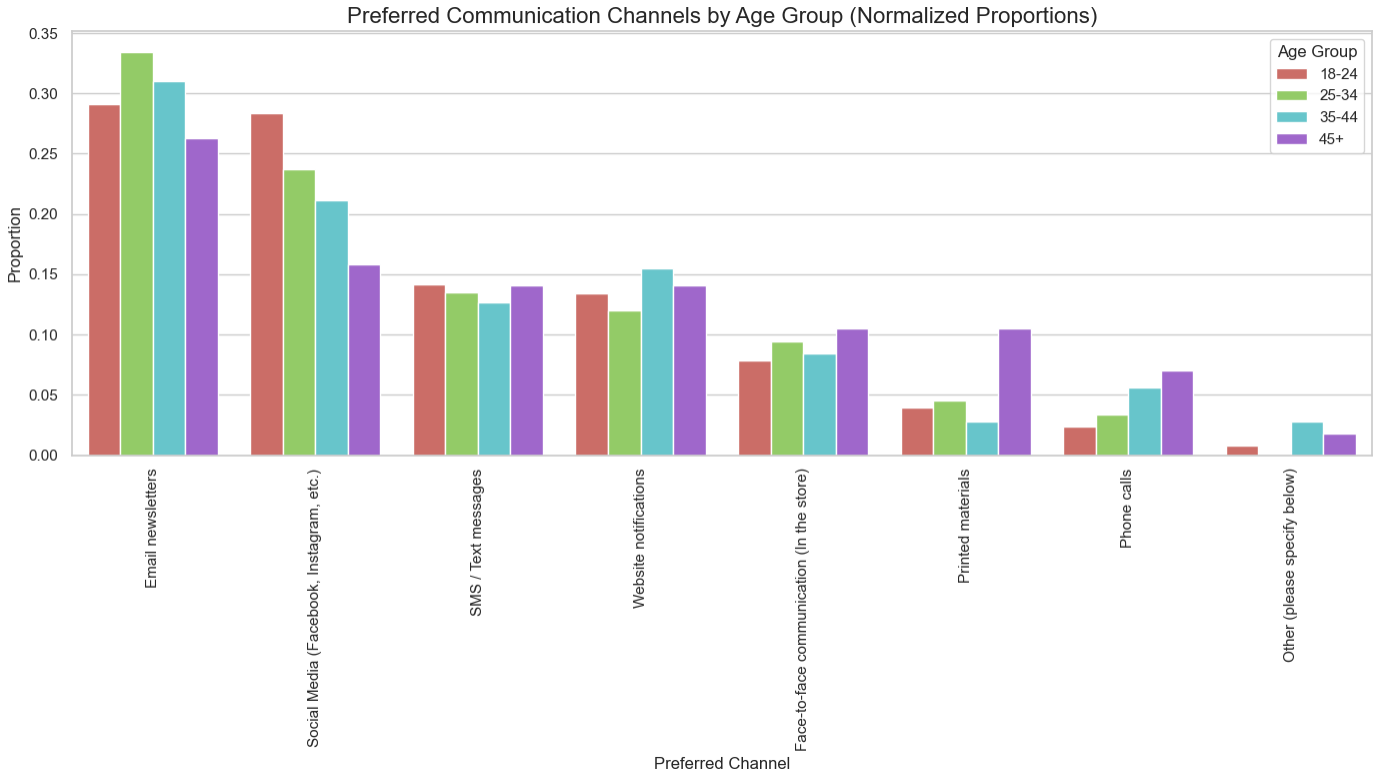

Figure 3. A graph about the Age Group demographic with all the different communication channels.

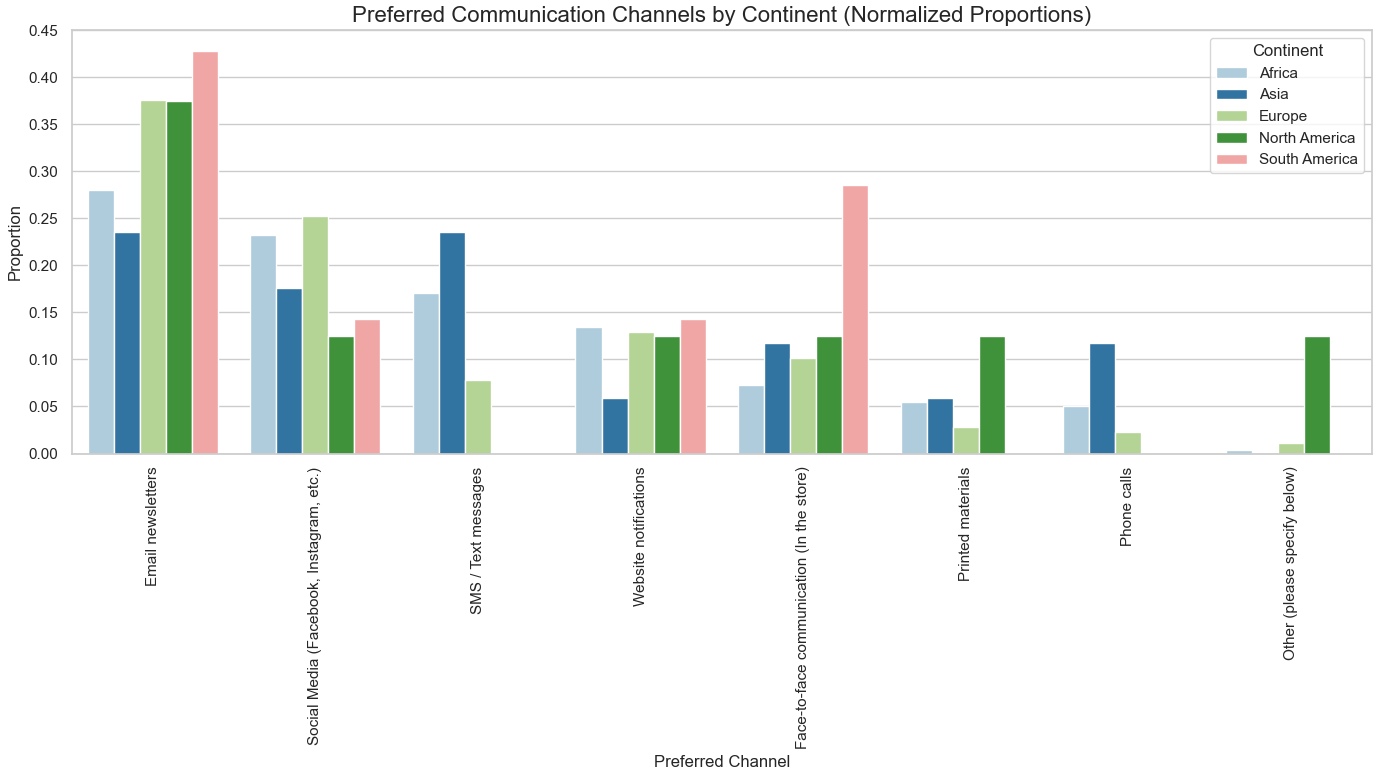

Figure 4. A graph about the Nationality demographic with all the different communication channels.

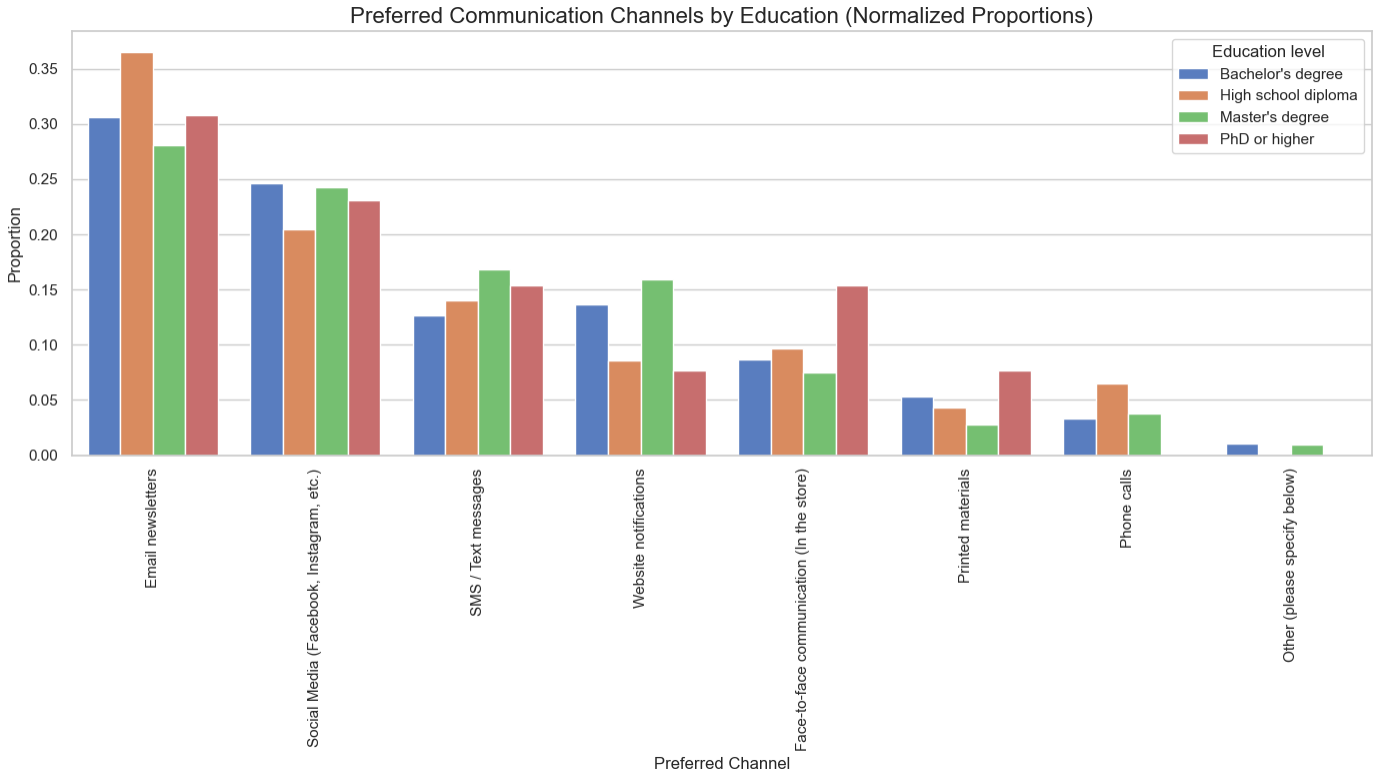

Figure 5. A graph about the Education Level demographic with all the different communication channels.

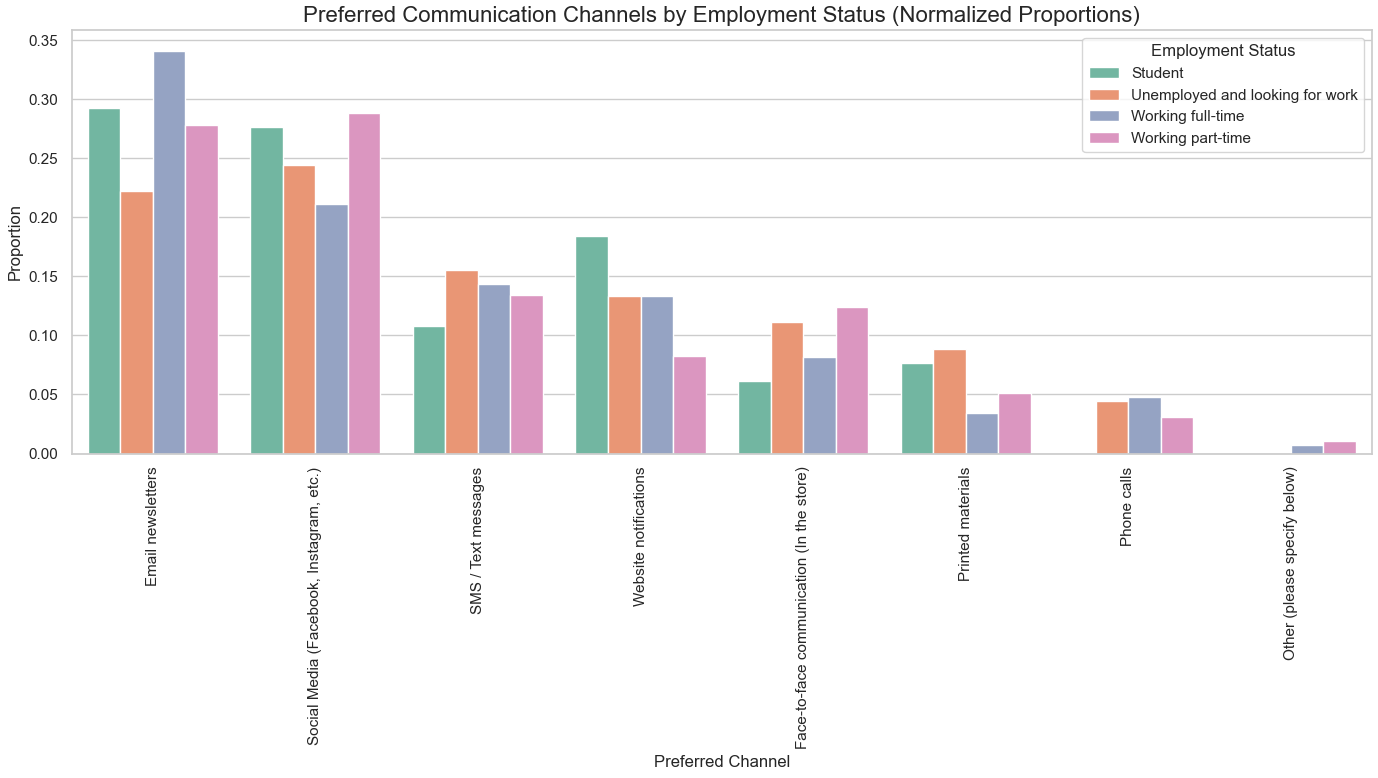

Figure 6. A graph about the Employment Status demographic with all the different communication channels.

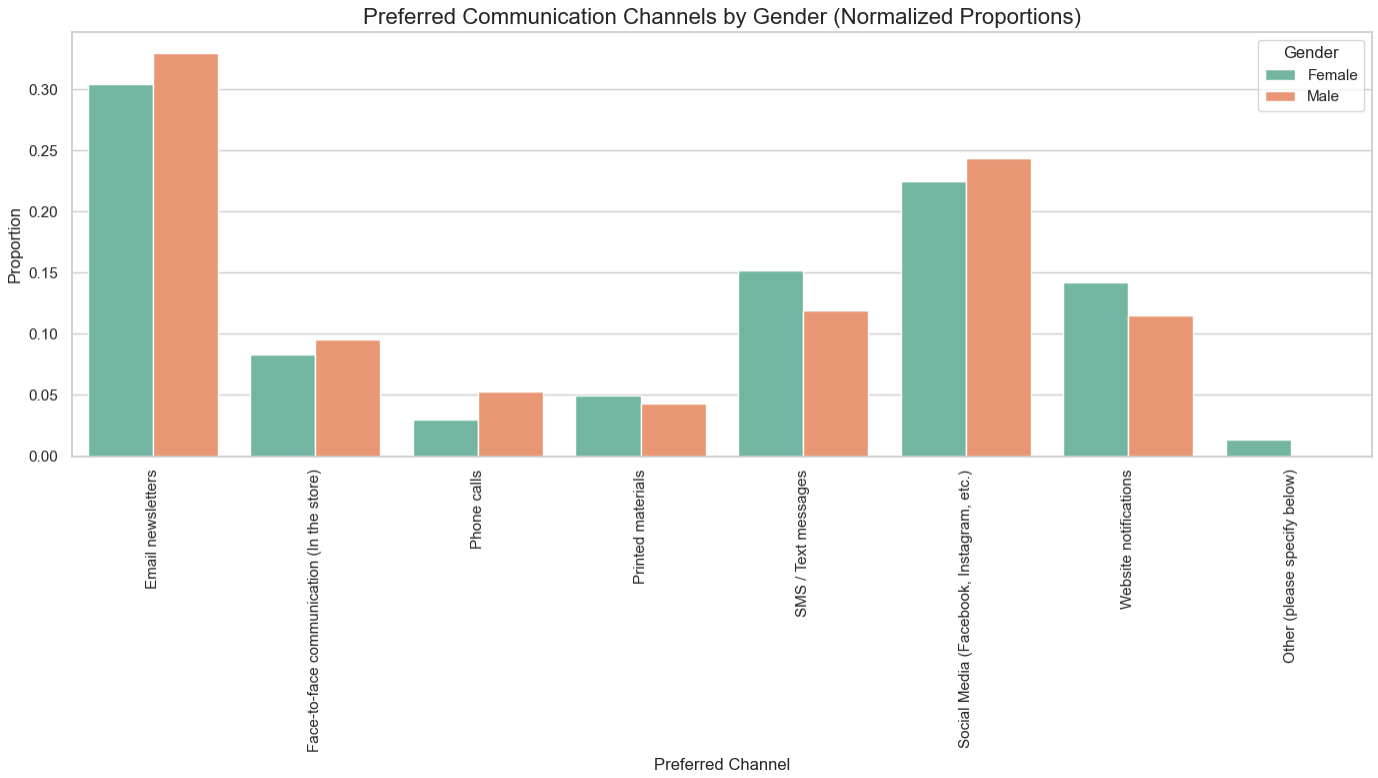

Figure 7. A graph about the Gender Identity demographic with all the different communication channels.

Demographic Type	Demographic Groups	Top Preference	Second Preference	Third Preference
Age Group	18-24	Social Media (28.3%)	Email Newsletters (29.1%)	SMS (14.2%)
	25-34	Email Newsletters (33.5%)	Social Media (23.7%)	SMS (13.5%)
	35-44	Email Newsletters (30.9%)	Social Media (21.1%)	SMS (12.7%)
	45+	Email Newsletters (26.3%)	Website Notifications (14%)	SMS (14%)
Nationality	Africa	Email Newsletters (28%)	Social Media (23.3%)	SMS (17.1%)
	Asia	Email Newsletters (23.5%)	SMS (23.5%)	Social Media (17.6%)
	Europe	Email Newsletters (37.6%)	Social Media (25.3%)	Website Notifications (13%)
	North America	Email Newsletters (37.5%)	Website Notifications (12.5%)	Social Media (12.5%)
	South America	Email Newsletters (42.9%)	Social Media (14.3%)	Website Notifications / Face-to-Face
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	Email Newsletters (30.7%)	Social Media (24.7%)	SMS (12.7%)
	High School Diploma	Email Newsletters (36.6%)	Social Media (20.4%)	SMS (13.9%)
	Master's Degree	Email Newsletters (28%)	Social Media (24.3%)	SMS (16.8%)
	PhD or Higher	Email Newsletters (30.8%)	Website Notifications (15.4%)	Social Media (23%)
Employment Status	Working Full-Time	Email Newsletters (34.1%)	Social Media (21.2%)	SMS (14.3%)
	Working Part-Time	Social Media (28.9%)	Email Newsletters (27.8%)	SMS (13.4%)
	Student	Email Newsletters (29.2%)	Social Media (27.7%)	Website Notifications (18.5%)
	Unemployed	Social Media (24.4%)	Email Newsletters (22.2%)	SMS (15.6%)
Gender	Female	Email Newsletters (30.5%)	Social Media (22.5%)	SMS (15.2%)
	Male	Email Newsletters (33%)	Social Media (24.4%)	SMS (11.9%)

Figure 8. This figure displays how different demographic groups (age, gender, education, employment, and continent) prioritize communication channels like email, social media, and SMS. Key insights include younger audiences favoring social media and email, while older individuals prefer email newsletters.

Demographic Factor	Credibility type	P-value	Hypothesis
Age Group	Websites	0.7270618540940078	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.6043540145396058	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.10781528308871931	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.11056944660311833	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.2927683658437539	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.8036856390611865	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Nationality	Websites	0.41899658063101347	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.033774253528641995	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.12657679375030087	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.002152776045008725	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.011507326327055324	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.7466069109322675	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Education Level	Websites	0.1772963255330469	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.4892850887810988	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.5738461120006133	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.8312588347046505	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.8459277283260525	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.8538198687720605	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Employment Status	Websites	0.8641430096233013	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.807308984008827	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.907256773385814	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.009605660125904077	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.13464738787818636	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.45768951502368416	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
Gender	Websites	0.15506206749916865	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Social Media	0.15722372107925017	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	Email & Newsletters	0.009806082778921761	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	SMS & Text Messages	0.022797376747219034	Reject the Null Hypothesis
	Phone Calls	0.8807240858120026	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis
	In-Person	0.12072994558766396	Fail to reject the Null Hypothesis

Figure 9. This table shows how age, nationality, education, employment status, and gender influence the perceived credibility of information sources about SMEs. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were found for nationality, employment status, and gender, suggesting these factors shape credibility assessments.