

**THE IMPACT OF CONSUMER AWARENESS ON BIG TECH'S
MONOPOLISTIC PRACTICES ON USAGE PATTERNS**

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between public awareness of monopolistic practices by Big Tech and consumer behavior. It aims to assess how awareness, trust, usage, and spending differ across various age, educational, and income groups. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 304 participants, and descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to assess relationships. Findings demonstrate low to moderate levels of awareness, with educated and higher-income participants having the highest levels of awareness. Awareness did not correlate negatively with usage and spending as anticipated. Interestingly, the relationship between awareness and spending was positively correlated, as informed consumers spent on services despite the potential risks to privacy. Another interesting finding was that demographics played a significant role in how consumers acted in the digital environment and decision-making. Therefore, different socio-economic contexts and generations have different relationships with digital behavior, with digital literacy factors as a further consideration. Theoretical implications suggest that awareness and knowledge were not enough for behavioral change. However, even highly aware consumers have strong ties with usage and spending of Big Tech products. In more practical terms, the study highlights consumer choice and its limits, and the role of education and structure. For policy implications, the findings of the study favor greater regulations, risks of monopolistic practices, antitrust policy, and digital literacy programs, which could have disruptive effects for users and create fairer markets in a digital context.

Keywords: Big Tech, consumer awareness, consumer behavior, privacy paradox, digital literacy

Introduction

Background and Context

The "Big Tech" phrase is being used to refer to influential technology firms that dominate digital markets. They represent a high market power in the digital era rather than large firms in a traditional sense. The original term generally refers to the five U.S.-based firms Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta (Facebook), and Microsoft, but that has expanded to include Tesla, NVIDIA, Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent. Although some of this group also operate outside the digital market, they hold a similar form of dominance over digital infrastructures. The rise of these firms is representative of the larger digital transformations that have occurred over the last 30 years, which have shifted many industries like commerce, communication, social media, and information globally.

While Big Tech has been met with convenience, innovation, and efficiency, the rapid change has also created significant social, economic, and ethical challenges. Many important issues, such as preventing competition and limiting efforts to consumer choice, monopolization and consolidation, and how ownership and usage of personal data by these firms have become central to discussions around these issues. As pointed out by Straubert et al. (2023), multiple times, Amazon has been accused of highlighting its own products in search results and hiding independent sellers unless they use paid advertisements or fulfillment services by Amazon. Similar criticisms have applied to Apple and Google, who have a tendency towards showcasing their ecosystem and their preferred services in ways that diminish competition (Birch & Bronson, 2022). In addition to its anticompetitive agenda, since the late 1990s, Big Tech has made various acquisitions of their potential competitors, regardless of sector or size. Over the past 30 years, Big Tech companies have purchased over 720 smaller firms, while U.S. regulators have only successfully blocked a single acquisition

(Moss, 2019). This goes to show the nature of Big Tech's growth, in comparison to antitrust enforcement.

The structural power of these companies is enforced with strong network effects. As platforms attract more users, they become more valuable, which raises the barrier for competitors to try to enter a market. For instance, by adding each new user to Facebook, that new user increases the value creation of the platform for others. Vardi (2019) uses cultural and mathematical ideas such as Metcalfe's Law and the "virtuous cycle" of a platform to showcase how digital platforms naturally evolve toward monopolistic states. In addition, the influence of Big Tech is not limited to market competition; these companies shape cultural and political processes related to holding an opinion, communicating, or citizen participation in democratic systems.

One of the most extreme examples of this influence was the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In this case, the company captured the personal data of millions of Facebook users without consent and subsequently built psychometric profiles of individuals to develop targeted political advertisements during the 2016 United States presidential election and the Brexit referendum. According to Bofa et al. (2022), Cambridge Analytica applied the OCEAN personality model to the development of political advertisements designed to influence attitudes on a large scale across a large audience. Not only does this indicate the astonishing data collection capacity of Big Tech companies, but it also illustrates the opaque ways that they can, and often do, use user data. More generally, the Cambridge Analytica incident was a signal about the threat to individual autonomy, collective decision-making, and democratic governance posed by concentrated entities with digital power.

Research Problem and Gap

While various scandals are widely publicized, it is still not known how many of the average users really understand how Big Tech engages in monopolistic practices or the

impact of these practices on their everyday digital lives. User awareness of privacy violations or anticompetitive behavior has risen in the media coverage and public conversation, but the relationship between awareness and consumer behavior is still unestablished. In fact, it is unclear whether awareness even leads users to change their pattern of usage and spending on these services, or to disengage altogether.

Concepts like the "privacy paradox," meaning the difference between how users tell surveyors they care about privacy, and their willingness to trade data for convenience or access to services, a privacy discourse that has attempted to paint us a picture of digital autonomy (Stoicescu, 2016; Zhao, 2023). While much of the research was focusing on the technical side of Big Tech practices, the experience of consumer behavior is overlooked. What is missing is the knowledge of whether consumer awareness of monopolistic practices translates into significant or meaningful behavioral change. This gap is especially important because ethical critiques of Big Tech often presume that once consumers are "informed," they will take protective steps as warranted, which may not be true.

The second research gap is related to demographic variables in consumer awareness and response. Research suggests younger users may be more prone to digital surveillance because they prioritize convenience over maintaining their privacy. Conversely, older users or users with higher levels of education may receive cultural messages that legitimize skepticism toward data-driven business models. Yet most research findings vary across different fields and methodologies. Few studies have precisely examined whether consumer characteristics such as age, education level, or income moderate the relationship between awareness and consumer behavior. It is important to understand the differences to produce effective media literacy education, policy initiatives, and public awareness campaigns.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to investigate how public awareness of Big Tech's monopolistic practices influences individual usage and spending patterns, and whether demographic factors play a role in shaping these relationships. To achieve this aim, the study will address the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are individuals aware of the monopolistic practices associated with Big Tech companies, particularly in light of scandals such as Cambridge Analytica?

RQ2: How do the frequency of use and consumer spending patterns on Big Tech platforms correlate with awareness of monopolistic practices?

RQ3: Do demographic factors such as age, education level, and income influence awareness and usage patterns of Big Tech platforms?

From these questions, the following hypotheses are developed:

H1: A majority of individuals have low to moderate awareness of the monopolistic practices of Big Tech companies, including high-profile incidents such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

H2: There is a statistically significant negative correlation between awareness of monopolistic practices and frequency of Big Tech platform use.

H3: There is a statistically significant negative correlation between awareness of monopolistic practices and monthly consumer spending on Big Tech platforms.

H4: Demographic variables, specifically age, education level, and income level, are significantly associated with differences in both awareness levels and usage patterns.

Significance of the Study

The implications of this research are theoretical, practical, and at the policy level. Theoretically, this research aggravates the ongoing conversations about consumer behaviour, privacy paradox, and the ethical implications of data-based business models. It aims to

advance our understanding by directly connecting awareness of monopolistic practices and consumers' usage and spending behaviour.

Practically, the findings can be used to guide digital literacy and consumer awareness initiatives. If a general awareness does not meaningfully change behaviour, as indicated by the privacy paradox, policymakers and educators may rethink how they can empower consumers in digital spheres. For instance, they may need to transition from a focus on informed consumer choice to an approach that includes stronger structural regulations.

At the policy level, the study provides evidence that is relevant to antitrust enforcement and digital governance. Through an exploration of consumer perceptions and behaviours, this study provides insight into how citizens encounter and experience market power in their day-to-day lives. Such understanding could ultimately support more effective public policies.

Scope and Limitations

This thesis exclusively deals with the monopolizing companies under the name of Big Tech. The scope of the study is international, as Big Tech platforms are firmly rooted in everyday life globally. The study will also be bound by the self-reported nature of survey data, which may fail to address actual usage behaviors. Also, while the thesis will review demographic differences, it will not capture all intervening variables that may shape consumer attitudes, like culture or political orientation; it only focuses on a few, like awareness, trust, usage, and spending.

Literature Review

Power in the Digital Age

The Expansive Power of Big Tech

The largest technology companies around the globe, like Alphabet, Apple, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft, have become a prominent part of the global economy by accounting for

about 25% of the U.S. S&P 500 market capitalization (Birch et al., 2021). Outside of the U.S., China's Alibaba and Tencent match the size of U.S. technology firms, while Baidu is significantly smaller (Jia & Winseck, 2018). These firms leverage a vast amount of data, infrastructure, and networks to solidify their dominance. Their influence becomes more indistinguishable not only in markets, but also in public discourse, public policy, and social norms.

Platformization and the Architecture of Dominance

A primary aspect of this dominance is "platformization", which is a process of centralizing different digital services into one large, integrated cluster of interconnected services (Helmond, 2015). Network effects play a key role, where the value of the platform increases significantly because of the number of users, and this enforces monopolistic practices and conditions, which discourage competition (Srnicsek, 2016). Big Tech leverages network effects and access to personal data to expand its power within digital ecosystems. As intermediaries and gatekeepers on their platforms, companies like Amazon and Google profit off end-users and third-party-based businesses or developers that use their firms' systems (Varoufakis, 2024). Furthermore, the effects of large corporations integrated into online platforms become a centralized digital economy, where alternative platforms may have difficulty in competing, even for visibility or viability. This has prompted some scholars to create new analytical frameworks that frame these tech companies as not simply dominant firms but as new kinds of digital sovereigns. Gu (2023) suggests that having the power to control information flows and access the data puts them in a position like a critical challenge to traditional definitions of sovereignty and power within an online setting. Big Tech firms hold a monopolistic rule-making or regulatory power over billions of users, which is the power to manipulate the rules of engagement of the ecosystem between platform stakeholders.

Strategic Acquisitions and Market Entrenchment

Joint acquisitions also reinforce control. For instance, the research of Ioramashvili et al. (2024) showcases how Big Tech acquire new innovators before they can even become effective competitors. Such power may create a restraining agreement that suppresses competition (Farrell & Katz, 2000). Likewise, Dash et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence of Amazon using self-preferencing algorithms that put their products before others, which creates an unfair trading market. Not only does this eliminate competition, but it also manipulates consumer preference away from competitors by drawing consumer attention to their products.

Beyond the Marketplace: Labor, Surveillance, and Autonomy

Big Tech's power is not limited to market concentration. Their influence broadens into labor relations and global sovereignty. Companies, such as Uber and Amazon, heavily depend on algorithmic systems to assign tasks or jobs; determine pay, and evaluate user behavior, creating power imbalances between the platform and users. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) outlined how Uber drivers are subjected to substantial information asymmetries and low levels of transparency, which operate as restrictions on labor autonomy. The reason Uber drivers have limits to autonomy is that they have only observable actions available to them on the platform. Shany (2025) critiques human rights standards for being insufficient in regulating abuses of digital giants. Lee et al. (2015) demonstrate that algorithmic governmentality identifies and shapes the behavior of workers through metrics and feedback from users, embedding authority without direct supervision. Therefore, Zuboff (2019) describes the commodification of user data to predict and shape behavior as surveillance capitalism. With increased dependence on data and automation, there are serious ethical concerns. For example, Vasilopoulou et al. (2023) discuss privacy risks of algorithm-based marketing and manipulative behaviors adopted through algorithms or bots. Wudarta et al.

(2024) demonstrate how, while big data is a good predictor of purchase intent, it's often used without the involvement of conscious decision-making and raises questions about consumer autonomy and consciousness. This sets the stage for the important feature of trust to help facilitate consumer autonomy. When Zhang et al. (2024) studied consumer trust within Generation Z's reactions to transparency about food production in streaming content, they discovered that with increased trustworthiness and sense of community, there existed increased engagement and purchase intent from users supporting ethical transparency in digital marketing. Big Tech companies not only use behavioral data to generate profits, but they also reshape consumer behavior and preferences using behavioral nudging and hyper-personalization actively.

Lobbying and Legislative Influence

Leveraging through lobbying and advancing favorable policies are equally concerning in terms of political influence. Popiel (2018) identifies a new lobbying elite in the media that actively constructs legislation favorable to Big Tech. In 2024, Issue One (2025) states that major tech companies spent \$61.5 million in lobbying in the U.S. In Europe, the Corporate Europe Observatory (2023) reports that Google, Apple, Meta, and Amazon spent around €113 million lobbying EU institutions. This is a direct influence on digital regulation, often derailing significant antitrust and privacy legislation.

Societal Impacts and Public Perception

Public Perception and the Techlash Phenomenon

Big Tech companies claim to stand for transparency and empowering users; however, they routinely obscure their actions, causing users to have limited insight and opportunities to question their actions. This obscurity increases user disempowerment, undermines efforts to reduce anti-competitive practices, and harms public engagement. With increased public attention, the term "Techlash" gained a meaning to symbolize a growing skepticism toward

these companies, manifested in public criticisms and demands for stricter regulation (Flew, 2021). 2018 saw a spike in scrutiny of the actions of companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Twitter over their connection to misinformation, data misuse, and monopolistic behaviors in relation to the 2016 U.S. election (Hemphill, 2019). In fact, that year, 55% of the American public expressed concern over the power and influence these companies had (Doherty & Kiley, 2019). While public sentiment has shifted since then, it is more difficult to say if this has changed behaviors among users.

Digital Colonialism and Environmental Impact

Besides political influence issues, the growth of Big Tech also contributes to global disparities. Academics like Kwet (2019) have identified a pattern of "digital colonialism" in how these companies entrench their infrastructures, invocation of platforms, and policies in Global South states, thereby reconstituting local governance and advancing neocolonial styles of economic dependency. The character of external imposition of norms and architectures of technology mitigates local innovation and alters sovereignty in the digital age. The environmental degradation attributable to Big Tech is another vital but frequently ignored part of its dominance. Niewenhuis, Voigt, and Althoff (2024) created FootPrinter, a model to assess carbon emissions from data centres, and they found that data centres contribute roughly 1% of emissions contributing towards the global greenhouse gas burden, and it is expected to increase significantly as AI and demand for cloud storage escalates. The environmental cost of digital infrastructure undermines Big Tech's ostensible sustainability discourses and necessitates carbon accounts that are fully transparent.

Global Governance Challenges

On the other hand, the concentration of power raises important questions about accountability in the realm of international governance. There is no coordinated cross-jurisdictional legal protection from algorithms, commercial uses of human data, or the

weakening of democratic norms, and it affects national governments' effectiveness in protecting citizens. This has wider results, such as worsening economic disparities and limiting the viability of alternatives within the digital ecosystem. Hendrikse et al. (2022) indicate this point as the “Great Technification of Everything,” where technology continues to dominate and encroach into the political and social space. It helps Big Tech to build tools of communication and commerce, and determines the rules of participation in civic engagement.

Democratizing Oversight: Proposals and Regulatory Efforts

In addition to this tension, Aytac (2024) suggests creating citizen governance boards to enable democratic oversight of algorithmic decision-making. Such a method illustrates a decentralizing algorithmic authority that places civic interest. As with Aytac (2024), Baldi et al. (2024) also have concerns regarding the authority of major tech companies and advocate for a globally connected coordinated “AI telescope” to systematically observe and limit the impact of leading technology owners. Legal scholars, such as Crémer et al. (2023), highlight the importance of fully enforcing the European Union's Digital Markets Act (EU DMA) to restrict monopolistic behaviour and facilitate competition; however, Evers (2024) raised the separation of visions between EU regulation and the narrative of Big Tech in terms of the ethical language as a severe obstacle to cohesive governance. The ethical language is often taken up by companies as a method to avoid regulation, so they can proceed using their agendas.

Although global governance challenges and normative governance proposals illustrate a theoretical need for regulation, the actual translation of the ideas supported by the theoretical frameworks into enforceable policy varies widely by jurisdiction. The "Global Regulatory Response to Big Tech - Legal Frameworks Governing Digital Infrastructure & Market Power" section will explore actual legal frameworks in selected jurisdictions.

The Transition from Consumer Awareness to Behavioral Dynamics

Consumer Awareness: A Multidisciplinary Framework

Consumer awareness is a central tenet of contemporary consumer behaviour research. However, what consumer awareness means and the factors that contribute to consumer awareness is conceptually and qualitatively quite varied across the fields of economics, psychology, marketing, sociology, and environmental studies.

In standard economic theory, consumers are typically considered rational and act as utility maximizers; however, this theory was called into question in the work of Herbert Simon (1963) and his theory of bounded rationality, which highlights the fact that individuals often encounter constraints regarding cognition, information availability, and often settle for acceptable but not maximizing outcomes. In addition to Simon; Ho, Lim, and Camerer (2006) provided a more complex critique of standard economic theory by introducing psychology into economic modeling, presenting a behavioural economics approach to demonstrate how shortcuts, biases, and framing of information might twist consumer perception and awareness not necessarily on logic alone, but also upon emotion and instinct.

While the field of psychology adds a further dimension into consideration, specifically regarding how cognitive functions of attention, memory, and perception enable consumers to value the information, will be explained later. Kimmel (2018) makes an important point that awareness is not strictly associated with the acquisition of information but with whether the information gained is mentally processed. Likewise, Petty and Cacioppo's (1996) Elaboration Likelihood Model shows how motivation and cognitive ability determine the degree of awareness, whether the consumer is deeply processing information or holds onto more surface-level characteristics, whereby even similar messages are perceived and acted upon very differently.

Cultural background is also a significant determinant. De Mooij (2019) observes in collectivist cultures that awareness is usually derived from shared values and group norms, while an individualist culture is typically dominated by the individual pursuing personal goals and independence. Blythe (2013) supports this by stating that consumer prior knowledge is socially constructed and based on community, exposure to media, and social class. From a sociological perspective, awareness consists not only of an individual's cognitive processes, but it is also about his or her position in society based on identity, group memberships, and norms that exist in society.

Furthermore, as people age, their awareness changes, as well. Moschis (2012) documents how older adults tend to rely more on emotional intuition and previous experience rather than analytical reasoning. This shift proves that not only do public awareness campaigns need to be tailored or selected content-wise, but also the processes used to communicate those messages when creating campaigns for seniors or other vulnerable populations.

Education, on the other hand, is another key element of creating awareness in consumers. Karakuş and Uyar (2017) explained on an interdisciplinary model of pedagogy that engaged students in connecting their ability to apply ideas from several fields to everyday decision-making. However, they also observed that this was especially challenging for students to reconcile abstract ideas into practical conditions and habits that affect real-life decision-making. This gap is representative of awareness not always necessarily being a forerunner to action.

Regarding green consumerism, awareness can encompass a broader range of ethical and ecological dimensions. Wagner (2002) showcased that perceptions linked to environmental concerns can be mediated by personal beliefs, the emotional relevance, and the extent of a sense of moral obligation to the issue. More recently, Bastos de Sousa (2023)

found evidence of a range of conceptualizations about consumer awareness amongst professionals, even within highly technical fields such as environmental science or engineering. While experts from these fields expressed a consensus regarding the importance of consumer awareness with sustainability, the key differences in view resulted from different emphases, where some experts barely address the issue, while others desire to get people to change their behavior. It creates a misalignment between what the expert identifies and what the consumer perceives.

In short, consumer awareness may not signify the same thing individually or collectively. Rather, it constitutes an ongoing and contextualized construct based on how we think collectively as consumers, depending on our backgrounds, our ages, our values, systems, and our learning narratives. Each discipline draws ideas or actions from will provide important pieces to the puzzle; no discipline will represent the whole. Understanding consumer awareness in contemporary society must be built on different pieces of economics, psychology, sociology, education, and environmental science: creating a fuller, more delicate picture of the contemporary consumer.

Personalized Digital Environments

Recently, the wide-ranging effects of Big Tech on consumer awareness have become a headline within the research literature and society. Corporations like Google, Meta, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft are the gatekeepers of the digital ecosystem and, therefore, function beyond merely the regulation of information access: these corporations also regulate the content, tone, and breadth of what consumers can access and, by extension, what they value or overlook (Poleac & Ghergut-Babii, 2024). These companies have originated extremely sophisticated online structures containing features like personalized recommendation algorithms and curated content feeds that can adjust the visibility, salience, and credibility of particular information, and therefore build user environments that can

accommodate that and present which can help limit higher order and reflexive thinking and embedded in a manner that already exist, even prior to consumers inquiring (Helberger, 2019).

The capacities in which these technologies have provided consumers to articulate, develop models, and influence consumer decisions in ways that could not have been imagined only a few short years ago (Wedel & Kannan, 2016). The larger technology companies now are employing extensive tools of big data technologies, algorithms, and machine-learning functions to create and layer content, ads, and services optimized to preferences and behavior. Major technology companies are now in a position where they can collect and interpret consumer data at scale. They can also move to a position where they are bringing consumer data together across devices and sensory input in the context of an ecosystem. Stoicescu (2016) explains that big tech companies use data points not only to understand but to predict user behavior, which means such platforms evoke predictive analytics for their platform architecture.

The growth of personalized marketing marks a new way to think about how digital consumers interact. Zhao (2023) argues that personalized marketing, which uses big data analytics in real time, tailors advertising and content specific to each user. Predictive analytics on social media platforms are able to refine product and advertising recommendations, which makes ads suitable rather than disruptive.

Further, Pan (2024) demonstrates how organizations use personalization through multiple touchpoints, such as subscriptions, including Spotify's loyalty programs, providing dynamic pricing and targeted recommendations on websites. These tactics are meant to predict user needs moving forward, minimize user disengagement, and optimize what Weller (2021) describes as the conversion funnel. Similarly, Okorie et al. (2024) show that big data

techniques capitalize on consumer segmentation and targeting to improve conversion and rate.

More widely, Katkov (2025) suggests that platform companies have not only shaped the channels through which consumers engage, but also what is considered as the standard of value and legitimacy. By setting themselves within decision processes, platforms shape what consumers consider quality and relevant; thus, the forms of consumer awareness become increasingly determined by platform-generated parameters that restrict independent critical assessment.

Also, Gabroy (2023) highlights how the value of user-generated short-form video content extends hugely in their consumer profiles and attention. Ma (2024) describes the short video marketing technique by Adidas, and found that while the company's brand facilitated the ability to attract consumers through formats of their choosing, like influencer promotions, the interactive media construction activates real purchase intention from consumers. Ma (2024) also found that the real-time engagement mechanic was enjoyable, playful engagement for consumers, and the purposeful links triggered purchase behaviour. Predictive aesthetics is a fundamental aspect of Big Tech, as Ajiga et al. (2024) found that artificial intelligence and machine learning models form predictions of consumer engagement based on historical and current data, either by utilizing speculative data by practicing big data as embedded into every day practices of routine inventory management systems and predictive scheduling systems that will manage the content for consumers while even predicting out transportation times as well. There is predictive capability and locality to accurately pinpoint how local consumer demand is met.

Perceptual Framing and Branded Ecosystems

Todua and Danelia (2025) display a similar feature that draws on the comprehensive research on the tourism industry and provides another authentic example of how social media

platforms shape consumer evaluations through their control of the frames and delivery of curated content. Their results suggest that perceptions of quality are not simply based on the foundations of the objective features of the destination in question, but on how it is framed through curated digital content, which supports the idea that increasingly consumers' desire not direct experience or analytical judgement to form awareness, but depend on design to frame information ecosystems (Todua & Danelia, 2025).

Big Tech contributes markedly to users' evaluation of credibility and trust. In the context of fintech, Ahmad and Hassan (2025) demonstrate that consumer trust in digital platforms is mediated by two factors: the perceived digital literacy of the user and the perceived brand image of the platform. When users are faced with complex or highly technical information beyond the boundaries of cognitive comfort, brand identity acts as a cognitive shortcut. Moreover, Big Tech is successful in using its brand in the replacement of the consumer to develop a more robust understanding, covering the way to surface-level trust as knowledge (Ahmad & Hassan, 2025).

Conditioned Loyalty

As well, another factor is the long-term behavioral conditioning that arises through habitual platform engagement. Moreno-Maynero et al. (2025) found that while people may indeed become more loyal to a brand after searching its name for a longer time in a platform setting, this did not translate into a better or more critical awareness. Rather, it transforms into a habitual engagement. In this experience, "awareness" does not stem from active inquiry, but rather via repetitive exposure, where familiarity effectively presents as insight (Moreno-Maynero et al, 2025).

Cognitive Shortcuts

Closely related to this issue lies the connection between digital trust and the authoritative role of technology. Often, consumers turn to Big Tech platforms not only to

consume information, but for interpretive authority. Effendi (2025) examines this in the context of blockchain or Internet of Things (IoT) technologies and observes consumers express a willingness to trust these technologies based on broad, generalized indicators signaling "blockchain-enabled security," rather than a foundational understanding of the disclosure of risk or systems in question. These disconnects are concerning, specifically in relation to trust and public perception, where perceived security becomes far more influential than cognitive considerations. What Big Tech effectively does is increase consumer trust, whilst lowering their awareness threshold, all while promoting reliance on credibility and not comprehension (Effendi, 2025)

Greenwashing

Strategic manipulation of trust in the notion of sustainability and environmental messaging conducted by Big Tech companies. Digital campaigns are increasingly designed to adapt corporate identities to 'green' values in order to create awareness of environmental responsibility. However, the truth of such claims can be vague while verifying the claims becomes impossible. Gennari (2025), further explains in his in-depth case study of Philips OneBlade, demonstrated that sustainability narratives did function in building trust among consumers and resulted in greater engagement with the product. However, the type of awareness created was largely superficial; even when consumers made some efforts to verify the factual basis of these environmental claims, they only utilized visual design elements and emotional branding called the 'green halo effect': perceived sustainability that came from marketing strategy rather than any factual reality (Gennari, 2025).

Behavioral Inertia

Clearly, the tendency to translate awareness into significant forms of behavioral change is informed similarly by the research on greenwashing and the issue of behavioral inertia. Battocletti et al. (2025) take up this issue by conducting an analysis of digital

campaigns that are focused on stimulating sustainable consumption. They determine that while informational touches elevate factual awareness and perhaps even perceived understanding among consumers, it does not meaningfully alter purchasing behavior which called "cognitively registered but behaviorally inert," and they highlight the increasing gap between what consumers know and what they do. These showcase a problematic paradox in the digital age; while awareness may be widely broadcast, it doesn't mean that engagement or moral consumption necessarily follows (Battocletti et al., 2025).

Occasional Exceptions

Yet, there are occasional instances when digital platforms are able to move engagement into informed consumer awareness Pimpalkar et al. (2025) make a solid case for promoting a solar company's digital energy platform, which includes life-cycle costing models to depict not only what the solar energy will ultimately cost when acquired, but also the longer-term implications of their choices. In these examples, the digital infrastructure did more than create a purely advertising effect; it contributed to an actual development of environmental literacy, beyond simply comprehension. However, these cases remain far too few. Much more common are presentation formats and visual trust-inducing strategies that hide the long-term implications of those representations, focusing on aesthetic clarity or emotional satisfaction without reference to the choice made. This suggests there is an awareness of a visual cue, a brand strategy, or some interface (Pimpalkar et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Overall, these studies suggest the multiple and expansive ways that Big Tech influences consumer awareness. Awareness is no longer an immediate production of the exposure of information as it was previously. Instead, awareness is a by-product of how the information has been branded, curated, and filtered according to users through the increasingly complex infrastructures of platforms. These companies undoubtedly increase

access to knowledge, but they also provide structural constraints on what constitutes knowledge and how consumers process it.

Global Regulatory Responses to Big Tech: Legal Frameworks Governing Digital Infrastructure and Market Power

Today's digital world is increasingly dominated by a handful of "Big Tech" companies that have taken control of key online infrastructures. These companies dominate the provision of essential digital services and control the infrastructure that creates and supports them. As a result of this concentrated power, an escalating number of concerns have been raised around questions of fair markets, competition, and user rights on a global scale. In response to this power, an increasing number of countries are passing laws and policies to diminish monopolistic behaviours and restore fairness in digital markets. This represents a significant turning point in the way countries will manage the infrastructure of the digital economy.

European Union: The Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act

In leading the way toward this transformation, the European Union (EU) has adopted proactive regulation, particularly in the form of the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and Digital Services Act (DSA). The DMA and DSA approaches emerge from an environment more concerned with the content of market behaviour than the prior, often reactive antitrust enforcement environment. Most importantly, the DMA is an entirely new concept of regulation aimed specifically at certain identified digital platforms that are designated as gatekeepers, in which identified firms possess deep and durable market power. The DMA requires companies designated as gatekeepers to follow rules designed to prevent anti-competitive behaviour (European Commission, 2024). For example, Apple now has a requirement to support alternative app stores on its devices, and Meta must allow more user control over how their own data is used for advertising (AP News, 2024). The rules that were

specified above within the DMA, are attached to very serious and punitive consequences such as fines of up to 10 percent of a company's global annual revenue. Enforcement has already demonstrated to be active and assertive as in April 2025 Apple and Meta were fined 700 million euros in total for violations of DMA rules (Reuters, 2025a). The DSA complements the DMA with a focus on the content, advertising and algorithmic processes of large digital platforms. The DSA requires that transparency be provided in moderation systems, and algorithmic processes for very large online platforms. Both the DMA and the DSA supply an approach to regulation that promotes not only fair competition, but accountability and safety for users across the EU (European Commission, 2023). This trend speaks to an increasing belief by EU policymakers that clear and concise rules are necessary for lives on large digital platforms that function, like public infrastructure, in the public interest.

United Kingdom: Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act

In parallel, the United Kingdom has its own regulatory framework called the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act (DMCCA) 2024. As noted, while different from the EU, there are many similarities between the two frameworks. The DMCCA grants the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) the authority to designate firms with Strategic Market Status and impose bespoke rules to remedy harms related to the abuse of power by dominant firms, which may include requirements to be interoperable, prohibitions on unfair commercial practices, or obligations of fair access to services (UK Parliament, 2024). The DMCCA also covers consumer protection concerns in digital markets, such as bans on misleading pricing and manipulation of online reviews. Although the UK model is tailored to its specific legal context, it is in many ways inspired by the EU approach to regulation.

United States: Antitrust Litigation and Legislative Gaps

In contrast, the United States has continued to operate under traditional antitrust litigation as its primary means of confronting digital monopolies, but the legal and regulatory

development has not kept pace with technology. Despite being the principal enforcement authority for competition law, it is widely recognized that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which has limited regulatory authority that is poorly adapted to a digital economy, is limited in its ability to regulate competition. Some writers, First and Fox (2020), have suggested amending the authority of the FTC to regulate the gatekeeping behaviors of digital platforms in order to create mechanisms that protect consumers and allow for proactive rule-making. One of the reasons antitrust enforcement has had trouble is the dominance of the Chicago School of thought in economics that narrowly defines consumer welfare in terms of price. In a digital market, where things like the services offered by Google and Facebook are less apparent, it is impossible to capture the less tangible harms associated with digital markets as long as there is no monetary cost to the consumer, such as harm from lost innovation, exclusionary conduct, and misuse of personal information, through customer reporting. Glick and Bush (2023) argue that traditional frameworks cannot properly address present-day monopolies and contend that the frameworks need to be much broader to include the notions of structural market power and social impact. While there could be different approaches to each region, the U.S. While it has been cautiously taking steps to rethink competition law, the European Union (EU) has pushed the envelope further than the previous framework would have allowed. Nonetheless, the expansive strategies available for Big Tech competition and acquisition behavior simply cannot be fully captured in terms of the statutes of competition law. Many of those high-value and/or low-revenue acquisitions will simply fall below the threshold for notifying regulators. Hutchinson et al. (2023) indicate that merger laws need to be reformed so that we do not miss those strategic acquisitions. Naik and Nath (2025) also provide a similar cross-jurisdictional overview of antitrust regimes in the U.S., EU, and India, where, while the nature and style of enforcement may be different, reform is necessary. Federal agencies, like the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Federal Trade

Commission (FTC), have already filed lawsuits against the biggest tech companies, including allegations against Google regarding its control over search and advertising technologies and Amazon regarding pressure on sellers and stifling competition (FTC, 2023). These enforcement actions will generally seek structural remedies, such as requiring the defendants to divest business units or cease certain activities. The problem is that critics claim that litigation is simply too slow, retrospective, and methodical to keep up with the pace of innovation in digital platforms. Meanwhile, some legislative attempts to create more proactive regulations have been slow to materialize to date, including the Open App Markets Act and the AMERICA Act to regulate app store practices and advertising technologies that have yet to be passed by Congress (U.S. Senate, 2023). At the same time, federal efforts to pre-empt state regulations related to digital technologies, including around AI, have disadvantaged more localized governance in some states that would allow them to take more responsive action against claims of digital across state lines (Reuters 2025b). This slipshod and reactive approach has generated growing speculation about whether the United States can respond competitively or innovatively enough to rival the regulatory advances adopted elsewhere.

Global South and Asia: Hybrid Models and Institutional Gaps

At the same time, countries in the Global South and parts of Asia are shaping their responses to the power of Big Tech. Countries are designing responses that are drawing on the EU model (with the EU's principles) but are becoming specific to their local needs, preferences, and expectations from a legal, economic, and political process. In 2025, Brazil's Supreme Court found that Meta and Microsoft could be liable for illegal content posted by their users (AP News, 2025). This ruling represented a decisive step away from the historical approach of viewing platforms as intermediaries and represents a global trend toward the expectation of active accountability in digital governance. This shows how governance will

increasingly be on the agenda, as social media becomes ever more reliant on revenue from advertising and mobile users across global regions that are seeing similar developments. However, some developing countries have been showing some reluctance. Recent developments show that Mexico's competition authority (Cofece) has closed a lengthy investigation into Google's advertising practices without taking any remedial action, while this may demonstrate that limitations or other political motivations might be hindering enforcement action (Reuters, 2025c). In contrast, Singapore established a new division of its competition authority to scrutinise digital markets and increased its technical oversight and responsiveness in regulation. Other countries like India, South Korea, and Japan are starting to develop new rules regarding platform neutrality, app store regulation, and rights over user data, indicating either trending toward or further alignment with best global practices (OECD, 2024).

Toward a Coordinated Global Regulatory Vision

In summary, governments view digital infrastructure more as a basic layer on which economies and democracies are constructed, as compared to treating it as a market with elaborate rules, laws, and regulations built for focused and dynamic competition. The European and British theories of state regulation of digital infrastructure support pre-emptive regulation, while the American model largely relies on litigation. As the digital economy continues to develop, emerging economies are experimenting with new hybrid systems, localizing the spirit of diverse theories of regulation based on their local capacities to regulate and development goals. The coordination or equitable regulation of digital infrastructures is going to become more salient. If they remain unregulated, dominant platforms can inhibit innovation, limit consumer choice, and shape public discourse as they see fit. While there are still many legal and policy avenues or responses that different countries will have to engage in, there is a new and emerging consensus that needs to be applied to digital infrastructure

that is intended to be governed with intention. Whether through litigation, legislative reform, or institution building, it is clear that nations are starting to step up to ensure that Big Tech remains closely scrutinized within limits that serve the public interest.

Conclusion

In summary, the regulation of Big Tech is at a decisive moment, with governments on the move across the globe pursuing different modes of regulation in response to the concentration of digital power. The EU has led the way with the respective DMA and DSA frameworks that were established with an awareness of the urgency of the issue, while the United Kingdom has anticipated and adopted similar principles to its own legal context through the DMCCA. The United States, in contrast, continues to primarily respond to the situation through the lens of antitrust litigation, which has been slow and limited, and calls for reform in antitrust have continued to echo without a consensus to change. The rest of the world, in particular nations in the Global South and Asia, is also engaging in hybrid approaches to regulation, often informed by EU thinking but using local priorities and assessing local institutional realities. These various approaches exchange thinking and recognize how they are faced with similar challenges posed by dominant platforms, but the political, legal, and economic contexts in which they operate differ. All of this indicates collectively that digital markets are no longer assumed to represent self-regulating, self-organizing environments but infrastructures that require political oversight and governance. Digital regulation's next stage will likely depend on the ability of these frameworks to evolve and adapt to the rapidity of technological change and find a balance between fostering forms of technology, reorienting competition, and protecting users from risks.

Methodology

Research Objectives and Context

This study aims to investigate the connection between public awareness of monopolistic practices among Big Tech firms and their use of Big Tech's products and services. The research questions are posed to examine if and how consumer awareness informs digital behaviors, particularly as I increasingly consider what it means to be aware of how our data is being used, monopolizing strategies, and platform-induced habits because of Big Tech's dominance. This study attempts to address multiple issues. For instance, the fears about the growing power of technology giants in the digital marketplace and their influence on communities are recognized. Likewise, it is necessary to consider what information the public has in order to build a big picture insight into how people perceive monopolistic practices and the impact of Big Tech dominance.

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** To what extent are individuals aware of the monopolistic practices associated with Big Tech companies, particularly in light of scandals such as Cambridge Analytica?

This question looks at how the public understands Big Tech's impact on markets and personal data. Instances such as Cambridge Analytica serve as external government oversight of how digital platforms take advantage of user data, especially in politically-charged engagements. This research will establish a baseline of public knowledge and identify whether users can engage digital platforms with informed consent, also to educate consumers through ongoing public dialogue, transparency campaigns, or media literacy campaigns.

- **RQ2:** How do the frequency of use and consumer spending patterns on Big Tech platforms correlate with awareness of monopolistic practices?

This question looks to see if heavy users or high spenders have alternate understandings of Big Tech's market dominance than more less active users. This addresses an apparent cognitive dissonance between ethical concerns and consumer behavior patterns, whereby individuals critique corporatized use of their data or ethically dubious digital services yet continue to use these firms because it is easier or they cannot find an alternative. Understanding this pattern of behaviors can lead to future work in areas of policy, education, and building more empowered consumers.

- **RQ3:** Do demographic factors such as age, education level, and income influence awareness and usage patterns of Big Tech platforms?

This question will look at whether individual differences in background will lead to differential awareness, skepticism, or usage habits. Prior research suggests younger users appear more digitally engaged and less concerned with privacy issues, whereas older users or those with higher education levels appear to demonstrate greater critical awareness of their use of tech services. To reduce disparities in understanding and increase engagement in educational interventions and policy development, it will be important to identify these trends.

Research Hypotheses

- **H1:** A majority of individuals have low to moderate awareness of the monopolistic practices of Big Tech companies, including high-profile incidents such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

The assumption for this hypothesis that public understanding of Big Tech's exploitation of data and market dominance is limited, despite the level of media coverage of the story, may be attributed to insufficient digital training or motivations due to a lack of transparency from tech firms.

- **H2:** There is a statistically significant negative correlation between awareness of monopolistic practices and frequency of Big Tech platform use.

This hypothesis suggests that individuals who are more aware of unethical or monopolizing behaviors of tech firms will use tech firms' services less often, and therefore, awareness may inform behavior moderation.

- **H3:** There is a statistically significant negative correlation between awareness of monopolistic practices and monthly consumer spending on Big Tech platforms.

This assumes that higher awareness may limit the respective spending of a consumer or reflect some form of consumer resistance or ethical decision-making behaviour.

- **H4:** Demographic variables, specifically age, education level, and income level, are significantly associated with differences in both awareness levels and usage patterns.

This hypothesis recognizes that people from different social backgrounds will differ, both in their understanding of Big Tech practices and their level of digital behaviour. So older individuals may adhere to higher usage and lower awareness, while higher educational levels may correlate with increased scepticism or knowledge.

Research Design

The research is using a descriptive research design. A descriptive design is appropriate because the main purpose is to describe and map user behavior and levels of awareness, without manipulating any variables. The researcher is merely observing and reporting on patterns of behavior. The aim is to identify possible relationships, correlations, and patterns between awareness and digital engagement. A descriptive design is well-suited for studies to map phenomena without experimental treatment, making the data collected naturally occurring and clear towards interpretation. The primary data will be collected

through an online survey, which will also be analyzed using descriptive statistics to investigate possible behavior patterns and relationships between variables of interest.

Data Collection Method

The survey is the predominant and principal data collection method for this study. The survey will be used to collect information from study participants about their frequency of using social networks, and their awareness level about the practices of companies called big or major tech companies, including those involved in infamous scandals, e.g., Cambridge Analytica. The survey will feature structured and standardized questions so all participants will provide data on the same scale, and quantitative analysis can be performed quickly and effectively. The survey will be administered online so that distance and access to the survey are not barriers. The survey collected data and insights from around 304 study participants, which is enough data to draw general trends and first impressions from this data source.

Survey Structure

The survey is subdivided into three sections. The first section of the survey collects demographic data about the respondent's age, gender, education, and income. This information is important to analyze the differences in awareness and behavioral patterns across demographic boundaries. The second section looks at the perceptions of people's opinions of Big Tech behaviors. The questions in this section will ask if people are aware of, and their perceptions of, monopolistic behaviors, domination in the Big Tech space, trust in how personal data is managed, and any regulations or policies designed to oversee the oversight. The third part of the survey looks at usage and spending patterns. It will ask about their usage of Google, YouTube, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, etc. It will also ask how much money people spend on these services each month and the frequency they purchase from larger technology platforms.

Interdisciplinary Significance

This survey meets at the intersection of multiple disciplines, technology, business, and public policy. The research outcomes may help contribute to the ongoing global conversations related to antitrust action and reforming regulations or policies regarding the monopolistic behavior of Big Tech in the digital economy. From a technological standpoint, the research may help provide insight into how to enable awareness on a larger social level regarding the impacts of unchecked technological control. This survey and subsequent analysis can contribute to a larger understanding of how knowledge and digital consumption intersect, as well as engage the potential for meaningful insights for researchers and policymakers alike.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques using Google Sheets and Microsoft Excel. The survey responses include a number of important data points: the participants' levels of awareness regarding the monopolistic practices of Big Tech companies; the frequency with which they use products or services by Big Tech companies; and their self-reported monthly financial expenditures on the services. Demographic variables such as age, education, and income will also be used to assess possible variations in outcomes across population groups.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and compare the four key variables concerning participants' trust, awareness level, usage level, and spending across demographic groupings, including the group mean scores overlaid with grouped means displayed in grouped bar charts by age, education level, and income level. These categorizations offered a general picture of how the four key variables varied across subpopulation groupings.

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess relationships between the key variables, and the strength and direction of the linear association were measured for pairs of

awareness, usage, spending, and trust. All correlations were also examined for statistical significance to assess any significant positive or negative relationships.

As additional visuals, scatterplots with linear trend lines were produced to display the relationship between awareness and usage, and between awareness and spending. The scatterplots allow for a visual assessment of linear relationships between variables and allow for the correlation coefficients to be interpreted.

To report the findings, figures, and data visualizations will be prepared using Google Sheets and Microsoft Excel. This may include: bar charts representing awareness distributions, scatter plots representing correlations between variables, etc. These figures and visuals will be included as supplemental instruments to convey the trends identified through analyzing the data and make results more accessible to academic as well as non-academic audiences.

This integrative approach allows for both the careful evaluation of individual key variables, as well as their inter-relationships. The use of straightforward Google Sheets will allow for transparency and repeatability, and will still allow the researcher to extrapolate meaningful insights from a structured survey dataset.

Policy Implications

The findings of this research may be especially useful for those who make policies and regulations related to fair competition and consumer protection. Exploring how public understanding influences consumer behavior may allow future studies to investigate how transparency, regulation, or public education might promote more ethical behavior by Big Tech companies. Findings may also offer advice on how to structure more effective public communications and user-focused policy interventions.

Reproducibility and Future Studies

The research promotes reproducibility and standardization of the approach for future research. Using standardized metrics to measure awareness and use patterns will allow future research to use the same or expanded approaches. This would allow meaningful comparisons by population or time period. Replicability of the methods and findings adds veracity to research results and enriches the understanding of how digital behavior and public attitudes toward monopolistic technology firms interact and evolve.

Justification for Quantitative Approach

A quantitative research design is selected for its suitability in systematically examining the relationship between awareness and digital behavior. The motivating investigation of the study is whether people's awareness of monopolistic aspects like data misuse or platform profusion impacts their behavior when they are using services like Google, Amazon, or Facebook. A quantitative approach allows the collection of structured, numerical data that illustrates behavior trends within large populations. The quantitative research methodology also minimizes researcher bias, allowing the data to reveal results more objectively. Employing statistical tools like correlation analysis, regression models, and cross-tabulation, the study will reveal whether higher levels of awareness lead to behavioural change, and if so, whether the behaviours change further based on particular demographic variables. Furthermore, the data collected by standardised questions fosters consistency and elucidation, which leads to the reliability of data and the replicability of findings. While collecting quantitative data will lead to structured clarity, this is especially beneficial when confronting thorny issues like corporate influence, consumer sovereignty, and ethical norms around technology.

Ethical Considerations and Participant Protection

Ethics were paramount in the design of this study. The survey was structured to keep a balance of collecting and distilling meaningful data whilst acting ethically and protecting the privacy of participants. As awareness of public affairs and the activities of Big Tech firms regarding data collection were both primary foci of the study and problematic, as many Big Tech firms have been called to court in the past regarding unethical data collection, it was absolutely essential that the survey itself did not replicate or dismiss the contemporary posturing of some Big Tech firms regarding ethical data collection. To this end, the questions do not collect any personally identifiable information. No names, email addresses, IP addresses, or sensitive details will be recorded. All questions are optional for the participant, and participants can skip any one item with no penalty. The survey itself will be hosted by a secure GDPR compliant portal, where none of the collected data is retained or tracked via metadata. The consent form that will first be presented to participants includes the full explanation of the goal of this study, the voluntariness of participation, estimated duration of participation, and descriptive measures taken to ensure confidentiality. All data entry collected will be stored safe, will be encrypted on drives available to the researcher only. Results will be reported in aggregate form to protect individual anonymity. These measures are consistent with the best ethical research standards and help build transparency and trust.

Random Sampling Rationale

The study used random sampling in an effort to achieve a representative and unbiased pool of respondents. The Big Tech products and platforms that I am studying are used globally across many populations. They aren't specific to a demographic, region, or user group. Because they are ubiquitous, random sampling is an appropriate method for capturing meaningful variation, including randomness between users. A random sampling strategy ensures that respondents reflect individuals from a diverse range of cultures, socioeconomics,

and geographies. Random sampling also provides for a less biased assessment of the interaction and perceived understanding of Big Tech companies by users, which helps the external validity of the study. Random sampling eliminates selection bias as it ensures that a particular group is not overrepresented. Random sampling helps improve the statistical reliability of the findings, as it provides a better approximation of how the general population interacts with and understands Big Tech companies. In digital contexts, this is especially feasible, since online forms provide wide-ranging access to user bases. Randomly selecting respondents can be implemented through algorithmic tools or a strategy for random distribution to a greater pool of potential respondents.

Research Timeline and Execution

To maintain clear execution of the research project with timely completion, the results of the project have been guided by a timeline of the activities, including the following distinct steps. In February, I finalized and submitted the research proposal for institutional approval, as well as draft survey questions and the method of analysis. In March I conducted the literature review for the theoretical background of the study, finalize the survey and check the survey instrument for clarity and reliability, determine the target demographic group and begin planning for survey dissemination, In April, I deployed the survey, start collecting data, monitoring the response rates and any issues that emerge (while addressing technical issues), providing reminders, and trying to get more individuals to embrace participation in the survey. In May, I organized and cleaned the data I collected, conducted each of the statistical analyses (descriptive, correlational, and regression), and characterized the statistical analysis. In June, I drafted the thesis, in particularly relevant to the method and the statistical analysis. In July, I will deal with the thesis as a whole and consider the details in consultation with the supervisor, revising the whole length. By the end of July, I have added some additional literature to make the project better and more disciplined. August spent proofreading and

laying out the final draft. I reviewed the final draft of the whole thesis to make sure all academic and institutional requirements have been satisfied.

Study Limitations

This research contributes to the growing understanding of user cognition and action in the context of awareness and behavior related to Big Tech. However, there are limitations to this research. For instance, survey-based methods rely on self-reporting by respondents, and survey-based methods are limited by self-selection and response bias. Those who select themselves to participate may have a stronger opinion or awareness than the average individual in the public realm, which could inhibit how valuable their findings are. Also, relying on self-reported data from individuals also poses risks if the respondents may misread the survey questions or share socially desirable answers that do not accurately reflect reality. In the survey I administered, the total number of participants was 304, which is a manageable number for exploratory analysis. However, the findings for populations in general cannot be generalized, as an unidentified number of underrepresented users may have been limited based on the language, and the survey was described in different languages. The survey design was cross-sectional, where the information collected would technically only reflect behavior to one extent or another at one point, not an ever-evolving dynamic of perceptions and overarching changes in their digital habits, landline, and, therefore, also of awareness and understanding. A longitudinal approach would have helped in providing a better or greater understanding of how awareness and behaviour are subject to transformation over time. Finally, despite the intention to make the survey accessible and inclusive, I recognize that many of the barriers I encountered were specifically technological and linguistic. Overall, these limitations signify that while this study offers a useful dimensional assessment of current trends, further research is needed to conduct a overall clearer understanding of awareness, behaviour, and digital power in the contemporary terrain.

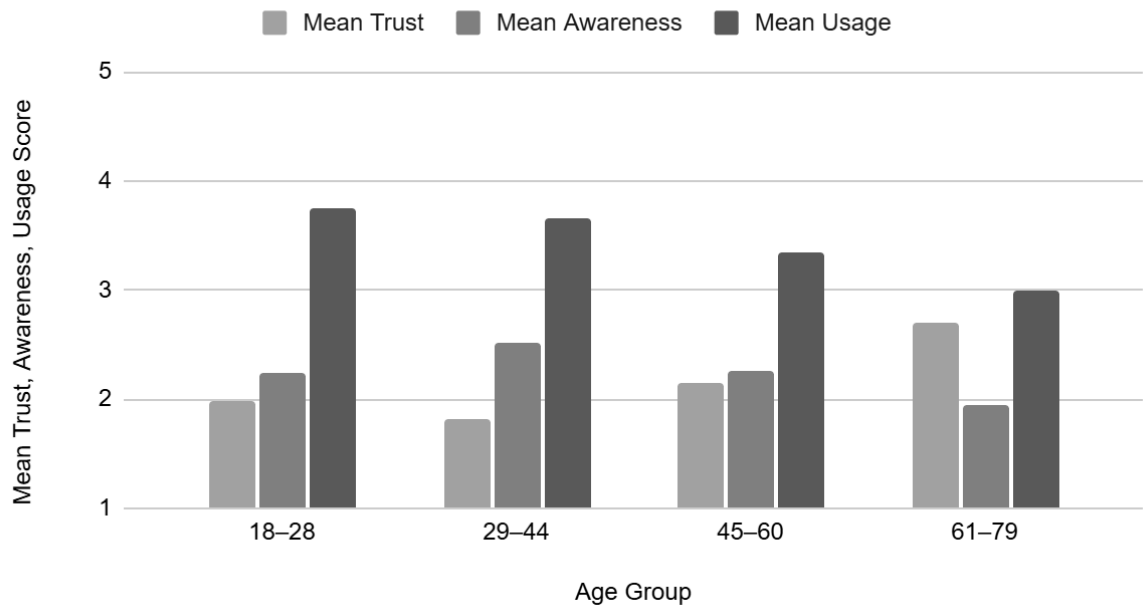
Conclusion

As explained in this methodology section, I employed a strong ethics-based and analytically robust approach to investigating the users' everydayness about their cognition and where the tensions exist between public awareness and consumer behaviour in the context of the growing dominance and power of Big Tech corporations. Ultimately, the methods and research design were a descriptive quantitative design, methods of random selection and sampling, and a willingness to protect participant anonymity and privacy. This study will and could provide credible, actionable insights to the critical and reflexive scholarly and policy discussions involving technology and society, ensuring clarity, reproducibility, and relevance while directly planning meaningful analysis and future inquiry.

Results

This section presents the quantitative results pertaining to the relationships between trust, awareness, usage, and spending on big tech platforms. Figures 1-8 provide descriptive statistics and bivariate visual trends by demographic groups, where Table 1 provides the Pearson correlation coefficients between the four main variables. All analyses were conducted on N = 303 participants for Trust and Spending variables and N = 304 participants for Awareness and Usage variables.

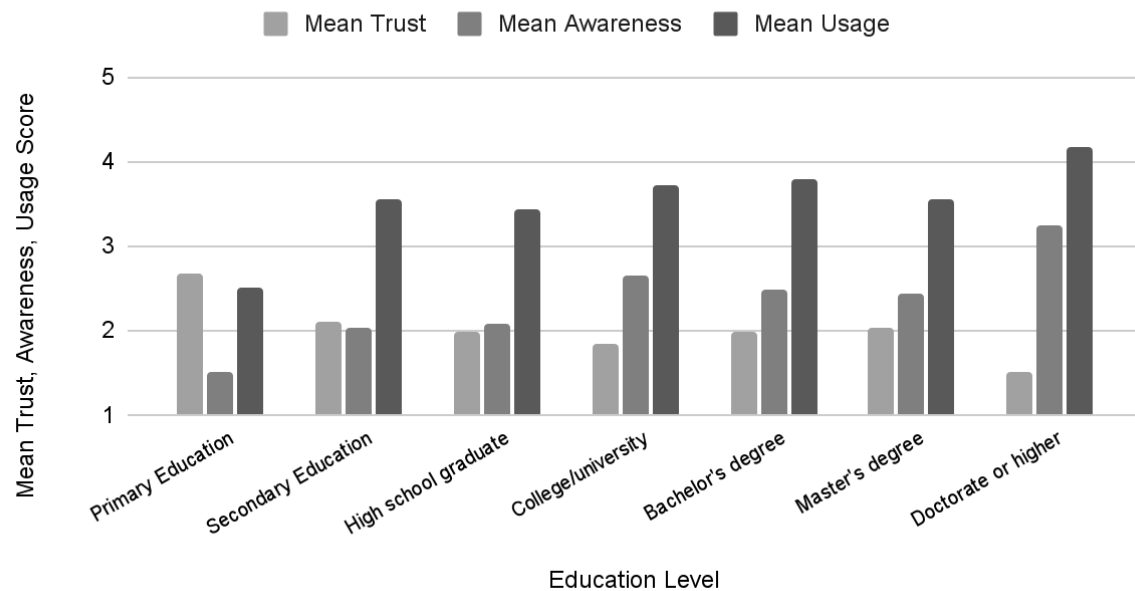
Figure 1
Mean Trust, Awareness, Usage Score by Age Group



The mean scores of trust, awareness, and usage are displayed in Figure 1 across four different age groups: 18-28, 29-44, 45-60, and 61-79. The mean usage scores were higher for the two younger groups, the 18-28 group ($M \approx 3.8$) and 29-44 group ($M \approx 3.7$), whereas the 29-44 group had the highest level of mean awareness ($M \approx 2.6$), and the awareness scores were also high for the 18-28 and 45-60 groups. The lowest trust scores were in the 29-44 group ($M \approx 1.8$), and the highest trust scores in the oldest group (61-79 group; $M \approx 2.7$). As mean usage appears to decrease with age, the mean trust scores suggest an increase as age increases. Mean awareness scores showed no drastic trend as compared to usage and trust and

were slightly higher among younger people compared to older groups.

Figure 2
Mean Trust, Awareness, Usage Score by Education Level



Mean scores of trust, awareness, and usage across 7 levels of education (primary education, secondary education, high school graduate, college/university, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctorate or higher) are presented in Figure 2. Scores of trust decreased across the educational levels, from about 2.6 (primary education) and decreased further to about 1.4 (doctorate or higher). Scores of awareness generally increased with education, reaching their highest value among participants with doctorates ($M \approx 2.6$). Scores of usage also increased, where usage score estimates are found at about 2.5 (primary education) and up to about 4.1 (doctorate or higher). Participants with higher education also reported less trust and higher awareness and usage.

Figure 3
Mean Trust, Awareness, Usage Score by Income Level

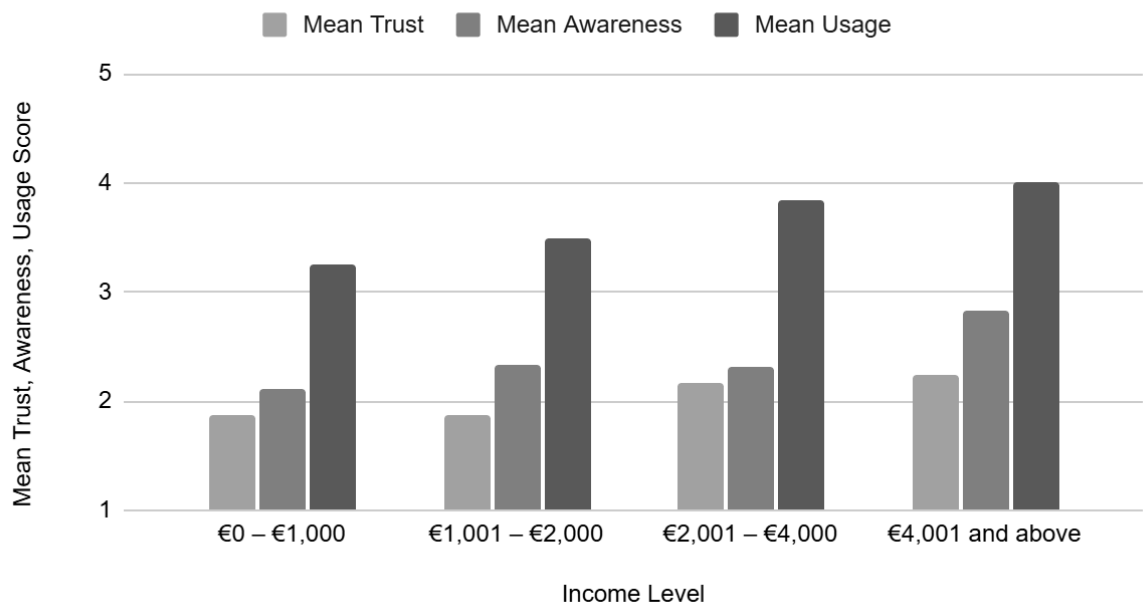
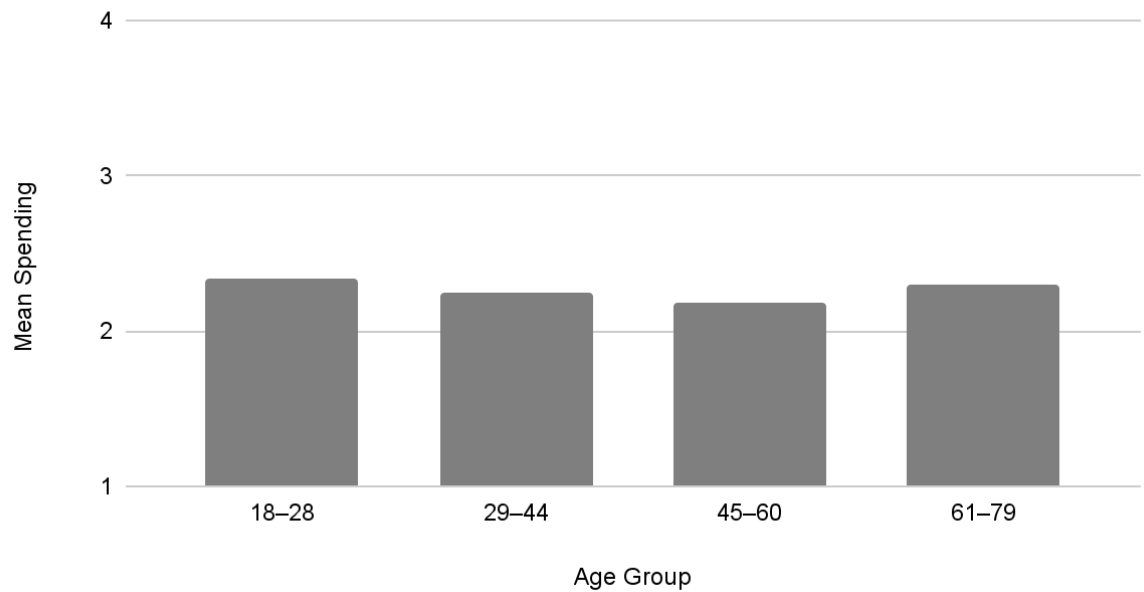


Figure 3 illustrates mean trust, awareness, and usage by income level, €0–€1,000; €1,001–€2,000; €2,001–€4,000; and €4,001+. Overall, usage increased consistently with income (approximately 3.2 (lowest income) to 4.0 (highest income)). Awareness equally increased with income, approximately 2.1 to 2.8. Trust scores were fairly constant across income groups with a slight increase from lowest-to-highest income groups ($M \approx 2.2$) to the highest income group. Highest income group had the highest values for awareness and usage scores.

Figure 4
Mean Spending by Age Group



The data presented in Figure 4 shows mean spending scores across the four similar-age groups: 18–28, 29–44, 45–60, and 61–79. The three spending mean scores were in the same score range of 2.2 to 2.4 for all groups. The age group 18–28 and 61–79 had slightly higher spending mean scores ($M \approx 2.4$), while the age group 45–60 had the least amount of spending mean scores ($M \approx 2.2$). The data are indicative of spending behavior which is consistent across groups, and no significant group differences were reported.

Figure 5
Mean Spending by Education Level

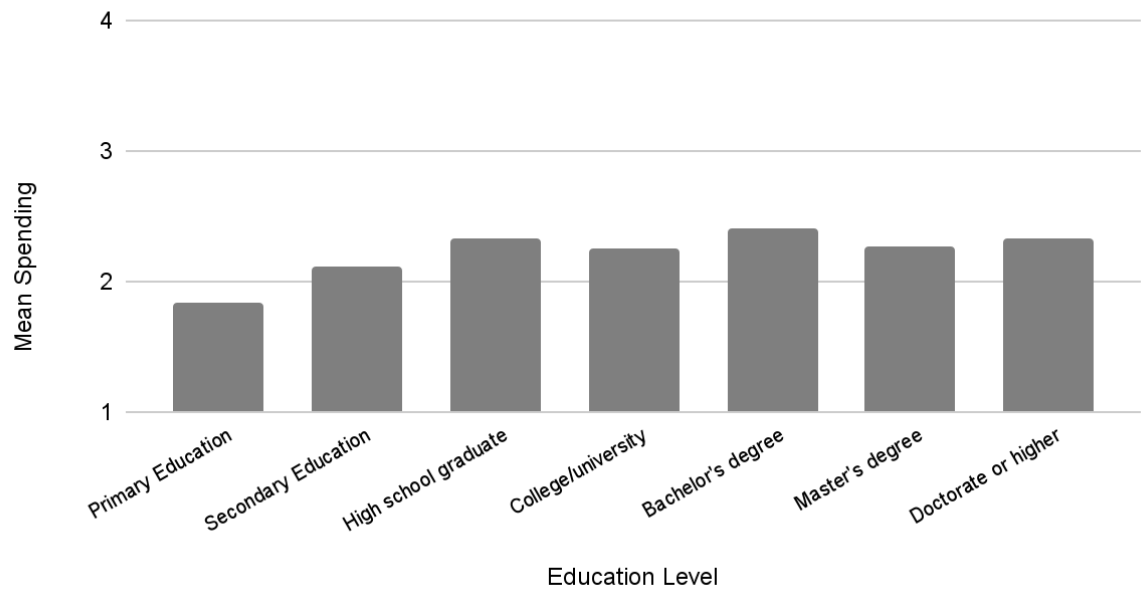


Figure 5 shows the mean spending by level of education. Mean spending increased as a function of level of education, beginning with an approximate mean spending level of 1.9 for people with primary education and a mean spending level of 2.2 for people with a doctorate or higher. The general pattern showed that this mean was increasing with level of education, with the mean leveling off across the final levels of education.

Figure 6
Mean Spending by Income Level

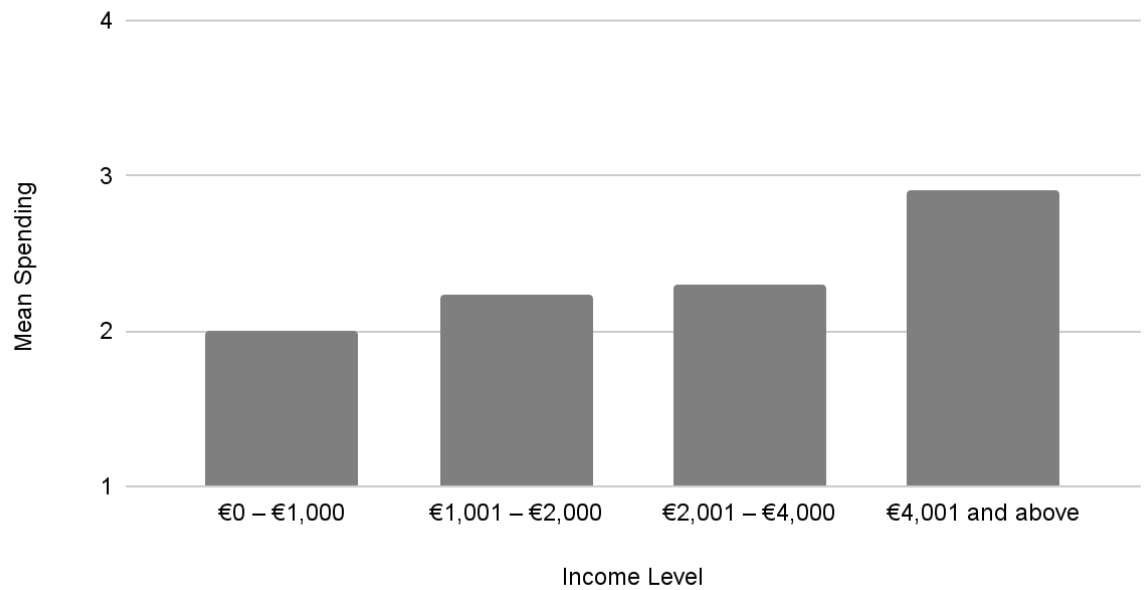


Figure 6 shows the mean spending by four levels of income. Participants who earned €0 - €1,000 reported related levels of spending ~2.0, while the €4,001 (and above) income category reported higher spending ~3.0. The mean spending increased similarly by income categories, which means the association was positive between corresponding levels of income and related levels of spending associated with big tech platforms.

Figure 7
Awareness vs. Usage

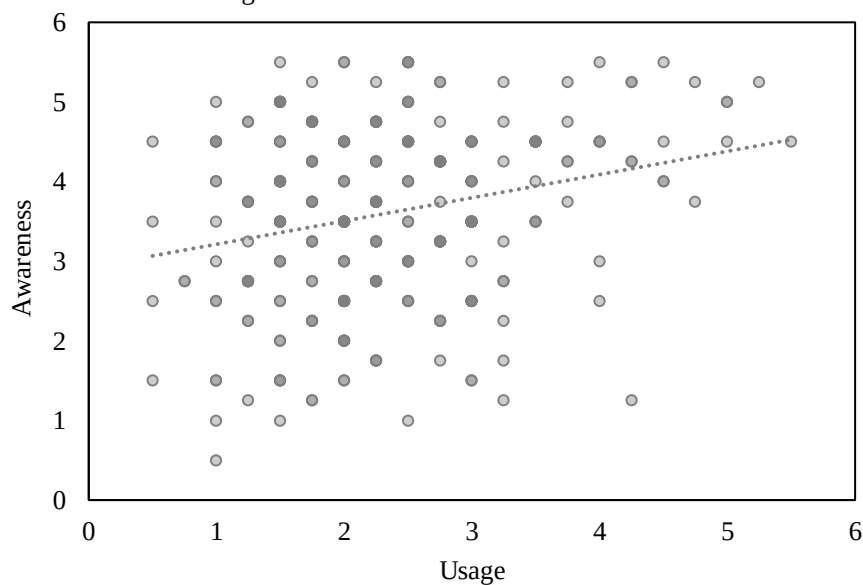


Figure 7 shows the association between awareness scores and usage scores presented in a scatterplot. Each dot represents an individual's scores on both variables. In the figure, a regression line fits best the scores, which is illustrated by the positive linear association. As usage scores increased, awareness scores also increased. The visual trend correlated with the positive Pearson correlation between those two variables, as shown in Table 1.

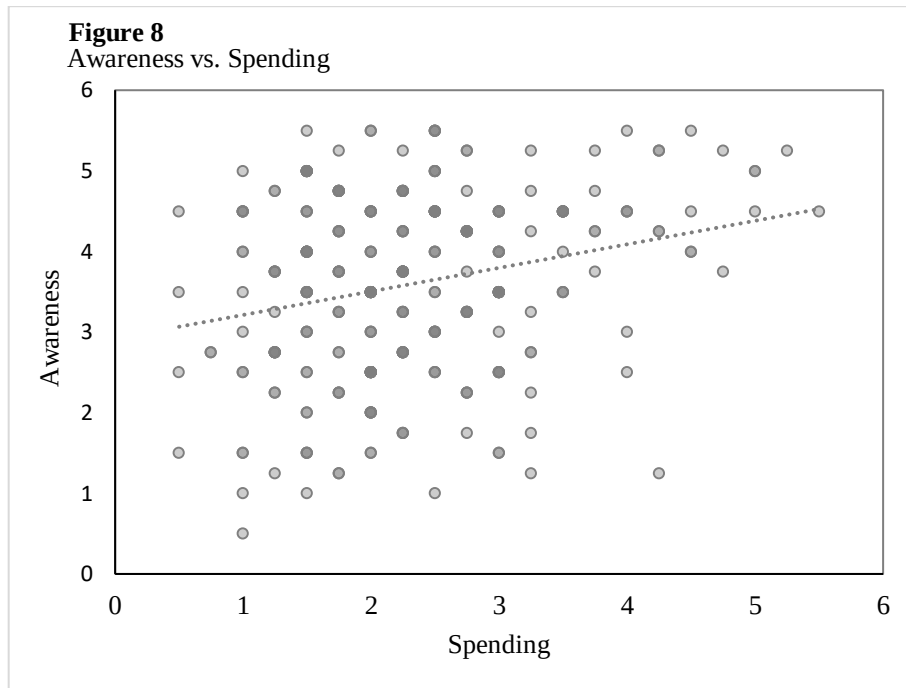


Figure 8 shows the association between awareness scores and spending scores, presenting them in a scatterplot. The dotted trendline indicates there was also a positive linear association between awareness and spending, according to the visual representation. As spending increased, awareness scores also increased. The visual trend is also congruent with the statistically significant positive association reported between awareness and spending in Table 1.

Table 1*Pearson Correlations Among Trust, Awareness, Usage, and Spending*

	Trust	Awareness	Usage	Spending
Trust	1	-0,2638038422**	0,002012685885	0,03985681892
Awareness	-0,2638038422**	1	0,2032057607**	0,189110263**
Usage	0,002012685885	0,2032057607**	1	0,2152735009**
Spending	0,03985681892	0,189110263**	0,2152735009**	1

Note. Values represent Pearson correlation coefficients (*r*). Diagonal entries are 1.00 by definition.

N = 304. $p < .05$. $p < .01$.

The Pearson Correlations associated with the four variables of trust, awareness, usage, and spending are provided in Table 1. Trust and awareness had a significant negative association, $r = -0.264$, $p < .01$, which indicated an inverse association, meaning as awareness increased, trust decreased.

Awareness and usage had a significant positive association, $r = 0.203$, $p < .01$, suggesting that as awareness increased, so did related levels of reported usage of big tech platforms.

Awareness and spending also had a positive association, $r = 0.189$, $p < .01$, meaning the higher the awareness, the higher the levels of reported spending.

Usage and spending had similar positive associations, $r = 0.215$, $p < .01$, suggesting that the more frequently participants used big tech platforms, the higher reported levels of spending on related big tech platforms.

Trust and usage had a non-significant correlation, $r = 0.002$, and trust and spending also had a weak, non-significant correlation, $r = 0.040$. Therefore, the results indicated that trust did not have a meaningful statistical relationship with either usage or spending in the sample used within this research.

Discussion

Introduction to the Discussion

The current study examined the relationships between awareness, trust, usage, and spending on Big Tech platforms, and demographic differences in these variables. The study was guided by four hypotheses and three research questions. There is a nuanced and complex relationship between consumer perceptions of potential monopolistic practices and actual digital behaviors. This discussion places the findings in the context of broader theoretical discussions, makes comparisons with previous research, and considers the implications in theory, practice, and policy areas.

While the findings provide fairly clear support for some of the expected patterns (e.g., demographic differences in awareness, usage), they also challenge the assumptions behind the second and third hypotheses about the presumed negative relationship between awareness and both usage and spending. Contrary to the assumptions outlined in the hypotheses, awareness was positively related to both of these behavioral outcomes, consistent with the "privacy paradox" literature (Kokolakis, 2017; Solove, 2021). Thus, what follows is an order of addressing each research question and hypothesis, then expanding into broader implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Awareness of Big Tech Practices

Summary of Results

Hypothesis 1 showed that most individuals would demonstrate low to moderate awareness of monopolistic practices by Big Tech firms even after significant media scrutiny of scandals in the domain, such as the Cambridge Analytica incident. While there isn't a longitudinal dataset available to compare the current sample's awareness to those from years past, the descriptive statistics validly demonstrated this expectation: even across the sample reporting ($N = 304$ for awareness), mean levels of awareness remained low to moderate ($M \approx$

2.3-2.6 on a 5-point scale). Awareness was somewhat higher among groups with higher education and income levels, as shown in the demographic breakdowns, but still far lower than what could be anticipated given the level of media coverage.

Interpretation

These results are consistent with previous literature that has recognized a gap between exposure of monopolistic practices and understanding of them. Scandals like Cambridge Analytica become part of the news cycle, but the public's understanding of the way data is exploited, surveillance capitalism, and oligopolistic control are only partial and fragmented (Shipman & Marshall, 2020). In this regard, awareness appears to be trivial rather than contextual or critical. Participants may be aware that "something went wrong" or that companies such as Facebook or Google are acting in a concerning manner, but may not understand that those issues are structural or hold significant implications for user agency.

There are several potential explanations for this outcome. First, there is still a digital literacy gap, even among a connected population. Ei, Tan & Soon (2021) highlight that greater digital literacy correlates with awareness, but probably also correlates with trust, and arguably, less trust reflects a more critical approach toward technology firms. However, many users may not have the essential knowledge to connect scandals to everyday practices such as targeted advertising, algorithmically curated content, or violations of antitrust regulations.

Secondly, as the very act of media coverage blends it into a story, it commonly simplifies or fragments a narrative altogether. Strycharz, Kim, and Segjin (2022) explain that the majority of media reporting catalyzes surface-level awareness of issues but does not lead to sustained behaviour change or contextual understanding. In this respect, while the Cambridge Analytica scandal may have raised public attention to privacy risks, it has not

necessarily enabled people to think critically about current practices in collecting personal data.

Cognitive overload and normalization may also be factors. Hinds, Williams, and Joinson (2020) found that although scandals raise salience, users normalize risk once platforms become integral to their everyday lives. Awareness turns into background knowledge and no longer motivates behavior. This partially explains why awareness in the current sample was low and did not directly diminish usage and spending.

Broader Significance

The relatively low to moderate levels of awareness have implications at the theoretical and policy level. From a theory perspective, these results make a distinction between awareness as recognition and awareness as critical understanding. Awareness as recognition seems to be widespread but superficial. Awareness as critical understanding is limited, although there appears to be increasing awareness among highly educated individuals. This distinction is comparable to the literature on "informed consent" in digital environments that documents how users formally agree to the terms of service without fully comprehending those implications (Acquisti and Brandimarte, 2020).

From a policy perspective, these findings prove ongoing scarcities in transparency and digital literacy initiatives, supported by the fact that many people are aware of monopolistic behaviors only in a superficial way, and they do not make fully informed decisions or act collectively as consumers for greater consumer rights.

Awareness, Usage, and Spending

Summary of Results

Hypotheses 2 and 3 proposed negative correlations between awareness of monopolistic practices and frequency of use of Big Tech platforms and any amount spent

monthly. The reasoning was that higher awareness of unethical corporate action would create a sense of resistance in users, causing them to reduce usage.

Unexpectedly, the results indicated statistically significant positive correlations. Awareness had a positive relationship to both usage ($r = .203, p < .01$) and spending ($r = .189, p < .01$). This implies that those who reported higher levels of awareness of monopolistic practices were likely using Big Tech platforms more and spending more on them.

Usage and spending were also positively correlated ($r = .215, p < .01$), which is harmonious with consumer behavior theory, as a user who uses a platform more frequently is also more likely to be spending money on subscriptions, purchases, or services related to the platform. However, the unusual point is in the awareness piece: rather than deterring the usage, it appeared that higher awareness coexisted with or perhaps even encouraged consumption and usage.

Interpretation

The Privacy Paradox Revisited. These findings are also highly relevant to the literature on the privacy paradox, which demonstrates the difference between stated concern over privacy and actual behavior (Kokolakis, 2017). People regularly express value and respect for privacy and concern over monopolistic practices while they engage with digital services in constantly. This paradox has been widely documented, from social media to e-commerce. Solove (2021) complicates the situation, arguing that these are not total paradoxes; rather, they are rational trade-offs. Users may consciously accept risks and tolerate monopolistic practices because the perceived benefits (like convenience, connectivity, productivity) outweigh abstract harms. So in this view, increased awareness is not leading to reduced use but a more resigned usage, where individuals are critical but will

nonetheless regularly find themselves using these platforms they believe they cannot really do without.

Awareness as a By-Product of Usage. Another interpretation is that awareness is an endogenous outcome of usage. Heavy users of digital platforms are continually consuming media coverage about the platforms, controversies about the platform, and peer talk about Big Tech practices. As Acquisti and Brandimarte (2020) note, knowledge about privacy and monopoly dynamics regularly emerges through participating in digital environments. In that sense, the positive correlation may also be explained by reverse causality: people are more aware of monopolies and privacy violations because they are users, not vice versa.

Media Exposure and Normalization. Strycharz, Kim, and Segjin (2022) show that media exposure drives awareness, but awareness is usually shallow and rarely translates into behavioral change. Frequent users would still be exposed to that media coverage through the platforms they are using; at the same time, people will also grow accustomed to media awareness over time. Hinds, Williams, and Joinson (2020) demonstrated that incidents like Cambridge Analytica might stimulate temporary awareness and concern, but people will eventually go back to a regular usage pattern once the news is forgotten. This interaction is what allows for the knowledge of exploitative practices to exist in tandem with habitual, advanced, high-frequency usage.

Consumer Lock-In and Lack of Alternatives. Even though there is consumer awareness, continual usage and spending can also be understood through the lens of consumer lock-in. Jacobides (2020) brings attention to the fact that monopolistic market structures constrain viable alternatives. Even skeptical consumers may continue to spend their money on Big Tech because there are little or no viable alternatives available in the important markets. Acquisti and Brandimarte (2020) also identified behavioral frictions that make "opting out" impractical and keep users tethered to powerful firms.

The Role of Trust and Brand Mechanisms. The surprising lack of correlation with trust was very minimal concerning usage or spending in this study ($r=.002$, $r=.040$); this decoupling can further suggest that trust isn't necessary to engage. Iyer (2024) shows that inside of surveillance capitalism brand trust mechanisms, including loyalty programs, perceived necessity, or ease of use, can maintain spending behavior even as consumer skepticism and distrust increase. This is part of the reason that participants had distrust but also had very high usage and spending behaviours, which is reflected in other empirical work (Quach et al, 2022).

Broader Significance

The finding of a positive relationship between awareness and usage/spending challenges simplistic models of consumer resistance. Instead, it highlights the resilience of structural and psychological factors:

- Structural: monopolistic strangle and lack of alternatives tether consumers.
- Psychological: convenience, social context, and rationalizing take ethical rationale out of the equation.
- Behavioural: awareness emerges from use frequency and empirical evidence rather than learning from education.

Together, these factors create a consumer landscape in which awareness does not lead to behavioural change. Rather than that, it creates a type of critical resignation, where consumers are tolerant of exploitative practices because they feel inability or unwilling to disengage.

These patterns of consumerism have far-reaching implications for regulatory and educational initiatives. Campaigns that focus solely on raising awareness are unlikely to lead to meaningful changes in spending/use; rather, for change to take place, systemic intervention is needed in order to shift incentive structures such as antitrust policies that disrupts

monopoly power, policy interventions that allow for interoperability or portability among platforms, consumer protection policies that shift responsibility from the individual to corporate accountability.

Demographics and Digital Behavior

Summary of Results

Hypothesis 4 posited that demographic factors (age, education, and income) would influence awareness, trust, and digital behaviors significantly. The findings provided robust evidence of such differences.

Age: young adult (18-28, 29-44) participants reported the highest usage but comparatively lower trust. Older adult (61-79) participants reported the opposite, with higher trust and lower usage. Awareness was moderately higher in younger cohorts, but peaked in middle adulthood (29-44).

Education: Higher education positively correlated with more awareness and more usage, but lower trust. Doctorate holders had the highest awareness but the lowest trust.

Income: Higher-income participants reported greater awareness, more usage, and more spending consistently. Thus, the trust of participants across income categories was relatively the same but varied only slightly.

The patterns presented here support the general expectation that demographics are key predictors of differing perceptions and behaviors in the digital economy.

Interpretation

Age Differences: Generational Contradictions. The age divide reported in this study converges with historical research, often retrospective, of generational differences in the way they engage with services. Young users are often labeled “digital natives,” and fully integrate technology into their daily lives through convenience, connectivity, and time.

According to Hansson and Manfredsson (2020), these users will "trade privacy for comfort," accept risks associated with digital resources, and perceive value in exchange for utility.

Older adults are often more skeptical of digital platforms. With the older group reporting higher trust in this sample, versus others (lower trust) in digital economy adults, this may reflect their lesser exposure to monopolistic behaviour. Afriat et al. (2020) argue that perceptions of scandals like Cambridge Analytica are sharply differentiated by age cohorts: younger cohorts are more cognizant of data misuse, while older adults are more likely to frame these issues as somewhere between estranged and institutional. This finding was also consistent with Pew Research data showing older adults are more attentive when consuming privacy-related news, whereas younger adults are generally more concerned but downplay their concern: younger adults exhibit a greater degree of engagement and expenditure while also demonstrating a lower level of trust in Big Tech, indicating a paradoxical relationship in line with the broader privacy paradox literature.

Education Differences: Digital Literacy and Critical Awareness. Educational attainment presented one of the strongest correlations with awareness and trust. Participants with higher degrees are consistently more aware of Big Tech's monopolistic behaviors, but they reported lower levels of trust. Ei, Tan, and Soon (2023) note a similar trend, where higher degrees of digital literacy correlate to critical skepticism, but not with reduced adoption.

This paradox suggests education correlates with critical awareness and attitudes, but awareness alone is not sufficient for disengagement. It would appear that rather than opting for disengagement from platforms, educated users may consciously recognize that the platforms circumscribe and commodify their data for exploitation. Furthermore, when adopting a critical lens, it is noted that educated users are more aware of the potential harm and exploitation of platforms, but are also more aware of their reliance on platforms for work,

research, and social connectivity. This is consistent with Lutz and Strathoff's (2014) finding, who noted that education acts as a moderator of how privacy concerns affect action, appealing to the notion that educated users are at once more critical, but also pragmatic in their engagement.

The key idea, here, is that there are important implications for policy. In developing critical digital literacy curricula that extend beyond information technology skills, educational institutes may take a leading position in contributing to awareness of market concentration, algorithmic bias, and data exploitation.

Income Differences: Affordability and Lifestyle Integration. Income was a significant consideration in established spending habits and awareness. The higher-income respondents in this study reported greater awareness around monopolistic practices, but also used and spent more money on Big Tech.

In terms of an explanation, this pattern can be understood through a combined approach. Firstly, wealthier individuals can afford the consumption of multiple services, subscriptions, and premium versions of previously “free” platforms. Secondly, there is an embeddedness in elite or professional settings, where Big Tech tools serve important operational, communication, and connectivity functions.

At the same time, wealthier users have a greater capacity to take a big-picture understanding of institutional acts of monopolisation. Afriat et al. (2020) suggest that the socioeconomic standing of individuals shapes their exposure to discussions around institutional acts of privacy and market dominance, and as a result, higher-income groups are much more likely to be aware of this issue.

In comparison, lower-income groups reported a lower level of awareness and lower overall spending patterns, which is likely due to a combination of their lack of fees attached

to access to policies. When taken together, this may exacerbate the “digital divide,” defined less in terms of access but where an understanding of the critical role Big Tech plays.

Broader Significance

These demographic trends evidence the importance of moving beyond the “average user” to better understand how digital behaviours are developing. Awareness, trust, and usage are not equally present, but are more structured by socioeconomic position.

- Younger people, lower-trust, high-use demonstrate a close relationship between scepticism and dependence.
- Educated, critical but high-use illustrates limits of awareness in decreased levels of engagement with monopolistic services.
- Wealthy, high-use, high-spenders demonstrate how market dominance becomes self-reinforcing; wealthier groups have more money to invest deeper into platform ecosystems.

Overall, these findings suggest policy interventions will need to be tailored to these demographic realities. Digital literacy campaigns may need to educate younger users about talking critically to help reflect whether young people are engaging in better practices and lowered trust with services, whereas policies that help increase dimensions of affordability and accessibility, addressing lower-income groups, will also be important.

Theoretical, Practical, Policy Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study provides new interventions into ongoing debates in digital consumer research, primarily related to the privacy paradox, and specifically questioning the role of awareness in this. This study demonstrated that awareness of monopolistic practices does not necessarily lead to resistance in behavior. Awareness was positively correlated with usage and spending, which overthrew an expectation based on rational choice models of consumer behavior.

This paradox reveals the need to reconceptualize awareness from a straightforward indicator of disengagement towards a multi-faceted construct shaped by psychological, structural, and social forces. In alignment with Solove's (2021) contention of the privacy paradox as a "myth," it was implied that users are making contextualized trade-offs of weighing abstract ethical concerns against immediate functional benefits. It appears awareness may co-exist with increased usage or may even be born out of it.

Furthermore, the demographic findings further refined theoretical models of digital divides. Age, education, and income were, in this case, viewed not merely as predictors of access, but also as predictors of different forms of trust, awareness, and usage. This is in agreement with Afriat et al. (2020), who argue that a socio-demographic position shapes not only access but the interpretive frames around scandals and market dominance. In this sense, this study advances digital divide theory by showing that differences exist beyond means and access, but require consideration of cognitive and critical divides.

Practical Implications

The findings have implications for several practitioners. Firstly, high usage and spending were still occurring with low trust and moderate awareness, suggesting consumers have entered into a state of critical resignation. While they may acknowledge the risks associated with that technology, they feel unable to disengage. This emphasizes the important role of consumer advocacy organizations and also non-profit organizations to provide education, transparency policies, and tangible alternatives in layman's language.

Secondly, for big tech companies, the lesson learned here is that while the phenomenon of public "scandal" might not dampen public engagement, don't fall into the trap of believing it represents trust. As Bellucci, Acuyi, Simoni, and Manetta (2021) illustrated, trust is weak, and scandals incur diminished reputational capital regardless of whether

engagement is maintained. Companies should be aware of the aggregate quilt-like pattern of reputational risk from exploitive practices.

Then, it is the universities, schools, and subsequently the professional learning curriculum, through and in proxy of other educational institutions, which have one of the most prominent roles in developing critical digital literacy. Ei, Tan, and Soon (2023) found that while higher education creates more initial knowledge of digital literacy, it also increases scepticism. This indicates that if posts and conversations around digital ethics, platform studies, and privacy were part of the curriculum, perhaps this would be necessary to build awareness towards action.

Policy Implications

Antitrust and Market Regulation. One of the major patterns to emerge from the positive correlation between awareness and engagement demonstrates the limits of consumer action in terms of monopoly power. As Jacobides (2020) explains, the limited alternatives available to users connect them to the incumbent platforms. Policy should therefore seek structural reforms to foster competition, which brings us back to antitrust action, breaking monopolistic-platform systems, and interoperability to combat user lock-in.

Transparency and Consumer Protection. As noted by us and Yi Liu (2023), while awareness may still prevail, it is likely to remain shallow and piecemeal. In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the lessons learned, regulators backing public companies must require single streamlined and standardized disclosures about their data practices. Potential decisions made by consumer protection agencies may include establishing their own independent public platforms to assess and communicate risk in simple language.

Digital Literacy and Public Campaigns. Public education strategies are always important, and perhaps more so for very young users who use a lot, but often have much less trust. Campaigns should go beyond 'warnings', and aim to target 'educational interventions'

that inspire action, so consumers are given practical ideas to reduce dependence and control their data, use their rights in relation to things like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Global Governance. Finally, given that Big Tech platforms are transnational, national-level initiatives may not be sufficient. Global coordination initiatives, for instance, through OECD or EU frameworks for digital policy, will be essential for establishing universal rules around privacy, competition, and accountability.

Synthesis. In summary, the study indicates that neither awareness campaigns nor personal choices can restore balance between Big Tech and its users alone. Meaningful change requires a multi-level mechanism that engages theoretically in models that account for trade-offs and resignation, and practically to develop mechanisms to empower consumers, and policies that alter the structure of online engagement in the digital economy.

Strengths of the Study

One of the biggest strengths of this research was the sample size ($N = 303\text{--}304$), which had sufficient statistical power to explore statistically meaningful correlations among trust, awareness, usage, and spending. This allows for generalisations about the findings in the study's context.

Another strength of this research was utilizing a multi-variable design, which allows for to simultaneous study of both perceptual (trust, awareness) and behavioral (usage, spending) forms of consumer engagement with Big Tech. The bi-dimensional insight provides a more comprehensive understanding than studies that only explore perceptions or behaviours.

It also allows for some demographic variability, namely, age, education, and income, which enabled exploration of how socio-demographic groupings structure digital engagement, while contributing to broader discussions of digital divides and critical literacy.

Finally, the research was timely and situated. After scandals such as Cambridge Analytica and ongoing antitrust investigations into Big Tech, exploring the gulf between awareness and behaviours raises important theoretical and policy considerations.

Limitations of the Study

Correlation, Not Causation

The research utilized a cross-sectional, correlational design, which limits any causal interpretations. Awareness and usage are correlated, but as my advisor, Prof. Cerquera stated, correlations can be tricky. In this case, awareness and usage being positively correlated may be indicative of frequent users becoming more exposed to info regarding Big Tech's practices than awareness leading to increased usage. To properly evaluate causation, longitudinal or experimental research would be required.

Self-Report Bias

Trust, awareness, usage, and spending measures are all self-reported. Participants may have under- or overestimated their behaviors or awareness, which could be due to memory or social desirability. This is especially relevant in the case of spending, as access to the actual transactions might tell a different story.

Measurement Scope

Awareness was measured as a general construct, which did not distinguish between surface-level awareness (being able to identify that Cambridge Analytica is a scandal) versus deep critical awareness (understanding the underlying structural monopolistic practices). It is possible that awareness was limited by the ability to measure awareness on this continuum.

Contextual Specificity

The findings reflect one specific cultural and temporal context. Awareness and attitudes towards Big Tech may differ across countries and regulatory environments. For

example, European users who are subject to the GDPR than users who are in jurisdictions where protections are not as strong, may behave differently.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of the current study highlight some encouraging directions for future research that can extend and deepen the understanding of the relationships between awareness, trust, usage and spending in the context of Big Tech.

Longitudinal and Causal Designs. As the current research relied on a cross-sectional design, longitudinal research should be conducted to understand changes in awareness and behavior over time. Future longitudinal studies could illuminate whether or not changes in awareness would lead to changes in behavioral shifts, or conversely, if the positive correlations established in the present research are indicative of stable correlations. Further, causal studies with an experimental design could examine the causal effects of raising awareness using an intervention (e.g., presenting participants with information about how their data was being exploited) on subsequent usage and spending.

Differentiating Levels of Awareness. Future research might specify the distinctions between surface awareness and critical awareness. This study assessed awareness in a general capacity; however use of qualitative or more multi-dimensional scales could provide clearer distinctions. For example, participants may be aware of Cambridge Analytica as a headline and thus engage with surface awareness, while at the same time, participants may lack critical awareness about the underlying structural monopolistic practices taking place. Determining distinctions between levels of awareness may allow for research to indicate why awareness sometimes positively correlates as opposed to negatively correlating with engagement.

Expanding Variables Beyond the Current Model. This study was limited as the focus on the four primary variables of trust, awareness, usage, and spending. Future research should explore additional variables, such as political ideology, digital literacy, and media

consumption on awareness and behavior change, which may moderate or mediate the relationships identified in this study. For example, someone who tends to engage with tech-critical media as their primary information source may understand awareness differently than someone who engages with tech-optimistic sources.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons. The findings are based on a unique cultural and regulatory context. Comparative research, examining different cultures, would allow us to consider how the regulatory context shapes the awareness-behavior relationship. Research on countries in the Global South also offers potential when varying digital infrastructures and dependencies are considered.

Mixed-Methods Approaches. Quantitative analyses provide important correlational data, but they can mask the underlying motivations for paradoxical behavior. Future research could include qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observation as methods to explore why individuals continue to use and spend on Big Technologies, even when they have a measure of mistrust, and indicate a critical awareness. Qualitative methods would also be useful in exploring psychological processes, such as but not limited to, resigned trust, habit, and peer networks.

Platform-Specific Analyses. Future research could also disaggregate Big Tech by its major sectors (for example, search, social media, cloud services, e-commerce). Awareness and trust may vary dramatically across platforms (for example, there may be greater skepticism of Facebook than trust for Apple). Platform-specific analyses would help contextualize the generalizability of the findings. In conclusion, there is an opportunity for researchers to move beyond single-point and self-reported correlations to actually investigate causal, contextual, and qualitative elements. This process will allow researchers to better measure the complicated ways in which awareness, trust, and consumer behaviours intersect

in the digital era, and inform policy that strengthens user agency and dismantles the power imbalance between users and Big Tech corporations.

Summary and Synthesis

This study aimed to investigate relationships between awareness, trust, usage, and spending within the environment of Big Tech, prompted by four hypotheses and three research questions. What was found was a complex, sometimes contradictory, comprehensive set of results that contribute to ongoing discussions about consumer behaviour, digital literacy, and monopolistic behaviour.

RQ1 and H1 examined the extent of public awareness about monopolistic practices, such as the Cambridge Analytica lawsuit. As presumed, levels of awareness overall were low to moderate in magnitude, with higher values represented in the wealthier and educated categories. These results supported previous studies suggesting media exposure only results in superficial awareness of issues related to the ethically minded engagement of consumers, and engagement of the critical thinking skills that we continue to limit (Shipman & Marshall, 2020).

RQ2, H2, and H3 examined whether or not awareness was negatively related to usage and spending. Negative correlations were expected, but positive ones were reached. This finding, in a way, supported the privacy paradox literature (Kokolakis, 2017) and suggested that awareness and attendant concern can coexist with continued or further increased engagement in Big Tech. Explanatory mechanisms proposed are rational trade-offs (Solove, 2021), lock-in experiences that limit alternatives (Jacobides, 2020), and awareness emerging as a by-product of heavy use.

RQ3 and H4 sought to establish relationships between awareness, trust, usage and spending, and demographic variables. Age, education, and income emerged as significant inverses shaping behaviour and perceptions. Younger cohorts reported greater usage and

lowest trust; Older cohorts reported the highest trust but were least engaged. Greater education was associated with increased awareness and skepticism, while income was directly predicted to influence greater usage and spending. This geo-tracking underscores the important role of socio-demographic contexts in our understanding of behaviour in the digital space and resonates with wider discussions of the digital divide (Afriat et al., 2020; Hansson & Manfredsson, 2020).

Theoretically, the findings extended the discussions on awareness and consumer behaviours, finding that awareness does not act to disengage from use, and in some cases may even reinforce usage and spending, under specific conditions. Practically, being cautious against relying on consumers to make choices to discipline monopolistic firms for consumer behavior is recommended. From a policy perspective, the results reinforce a need for structural change through antitrust regulation, interoperability requirements, and enhancement of consumer protections.

In conclusion, this study expands existing knowledge of the paradoxical relationship between awareness, trust, and behaviours in the Big Tech ecosystem. It demonstrates that while awareness of these issues is required, it cannot be relied upon to disrupt consumers' behaviours in ongoing monopolistic markets. In order to empower users and mitigate the power differential between users and Big Tech firms, a combination of digital literacy, consumer advocacy, and regulatory coercion will be essential.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how public awareness of monopolistic practices by Big Tech companies is likely to shape patterns of digital engagement. The public's concern over the exploitation of our personal data, anti-competitive practices, and our growing dependency on Platforms is at an all-time high. As such, direct requests for consumer education and some form of regulation are becoming more common. In light of this

backdrop, this research sought to answer three questions: to understand the extent of consumer awareness of monopolistic practices; to explore how that awareness will influence or connect with usage and spending patterns; and to understand the scope of demographic variables (age, education, income, etc.) in shaping these connections. By systematically interrogating survey data at discrete intervals with a single sample, this study offers a potential framework to understand what, theoretically, is some "behavioral paradox" of modern digital consumption: we may express criticism or distrust of Big Tech, but we will continue to engage with it.

Key Findings and Their Implications

The first research question examined whether individuals are aware of monopolistic practices as a result of some historical context (socially, culturally, or legally) at the time of survey completion. The conclusion indicates that awareness was generally low to moderate across the sample, at least compared to the high-profile breaches (i.e., Cambridge Analytica) that were called into question. Thus, supporting the first hypothesis (H1) is the reality that there had been widespread media coverage and public discussions over monopolistic claims of other Big Tech companies, but not all (even the owned Ones). Alas, it seems the participants' understanding of Big Tech firms - to the extent they held the knowledge base - was in fragments or association rather than perspective, or part of a response that could inform significant behavioral change. This is deeply notable as it reveals a significant disconnect between when information is made available publicly and people having the capacity to critically engage with that information. Despite this not being a fairly common critical understanding, these findings produce an unexpected and insightful paradox. Both research question two and hypotheses H2 and H3 proposed a negative relationship between awareness and engagement, presuming that individuals who are informed would reduce their engagement and spending on services from Big Tech companies. But these findings revealed

a positive relationship: awareness positively correlated with usage ($r = .203$, $p < .01$) and spending ($r = .189$, $p < .01$). In effect, individuals who reported high awareness also reported higher usage and spending on Big Tech platforms. This means that higher awareness does not deter engagement; rather, awareness co-exists and may even reinforce engagement. One possible explanation of this paradox is that those regularly engaging with Big Tech platforms and services are more likely to come into contact with media coverage and discussions regarding Big Tech, contributing to higher individual awareness but without a reduction in audience engagement. Another explanation is that when individuals are critically informed, their knowledge is limited in useful ways, such as structural dependency due to impact on networks, structural convenience, and structural lack of alternatives or competition. The paradox confirms the persistence of Big Tech companies' economic and cultural power, despite increases in skeptical consumer attention.

Trust took a different trajectory, however. As anticipated, trust was negatively related to awareness ($r = -.264$, $p < .01$), meaning that individuals who were more aware of the issues concerning Big Tech were less trusting of these platforms. However, trust was not related to usage or spending, further suggesting that trust is somewhat limited in its influence on consumer behavior. This disconnection illustrates an important structural imbalance: individuals may distrust Big Tech but continue to use it, further evidencing that digital dependency outweighs ethical or emotional reservations.

Demographic Differences

The third research question/hypothesis H4 engaged with demographic variables, and it produced particularly revealing findings.

Age. Usage was generally highest for the younger cohorts (18 - 28 and 29 - 44), but significantly, trust increased steadily with age (to a high in the 61 - 79 age group). Awareness was highest among those aged 29 - 44, meaning users in their mid-life are able to balance a

high degree of engagement with a reasonably critical set of knowledge. Together, these trends demonstrate an age-based bifurcation of digital behavior: younger cohorts are heavily reliant on Big Tech but skeptical, whereas older cohorts appear to be less engaged but demonstrate greater trust.

Education. The trends here were unidirectional: as education increased, awareness increased, trust decreased, and usage/spending increased. Doctorate holders reported the highest participation in awareness, usage, and reported the least number of trust. This implies that higher education contributes to critical understanding of where these platforms fit using digital services, but is associated with greater reliance, perhaps due to their professional reliance and participation.

Income. A similar stratified pattern emerged amongst income levels. Participants who, based on income level, reported greater levels of awareness, increasing usage, and increasing spending, and trust remained relatively constant by income levels. Those with the highest reported income levels (€4,001 and above) reported the highest spending level, demonstrating the way financial substance boosts reliance on Big Tech services.

All together, the data show that demographic characteristics matter in regard to awareness and engagement, but, rather than dulling reliance, they often deepen it. Higher education and higher income, which might suggest that users may have more power to disengage from a platform, suggest deeper participation and higher spending, but with greater cynicism. This finding is particularly complicating because it calls into question assumptions that simple knowledge or money alone empowers consumers to disengage.

The Broader Significance

Together, these findings show the inherent structural contradiction of digital consumption today. Awareness and trust go in opposite directions; more awareness leads to less trust, while awareness is generally associated with more spending and usage. Trust is

largely irrelevant for potential behavior prediction, meaning reliance on Big Tech is less about individual attitudes and more about structural circumstances. In other words, consumers may distrust Big Tech or may even be angry with them, but they rely on their services because it is impractical and/or impossible to exit the system with the current digital consumer infrastructure.

These contradictions have serious implications. For policymakers, this suggests awareness-raising campaigns alone are insufficient; just because people are made aware of monopolistic practices does not mean they will disengage from the behaviour. Instead, policymakers should look closely at structural solutions such as legal alternatives, entrenching antitrust laws, and forcing greater transparency on platform operations, to lessen consumers' reliance. Educators and advocacy organisations should also keep in mind that an awareness-based engagement will not be sufficient. Digital literacy campaigns will need to tackle elements of behavioural inertia that keep consumers tied to Big Tech systems and practices, as well as address the knowledge gap.

Limitations and Future Research

Like any research, there are limitations in this study. One important limitation is the heavy use of self-reported and subjective data that easily results in biases or possible over- or underestimations of behaviours. Another limitation is since this is a cross-sectional study, no causal statements or causal inferences can be made, meaning it remains unclear whether awareness leads to further usage or whether usage leads to awareness. Also, although the survey sample was diverse in various capabilities, it may not capture cultural or geographical differences that help us understand consumer beliefs and perceptions regarding Big Tech.

Future research can enhance this knowledge by using different study designs that either allow for longitudinal or experimental variables to understand the potential causal mechanisms of the awareness-behaviour relationship. Research on processes like habit

forming, convenience, or group pressure to maintain stepping outside of awareness yields behavioural dependencies; these are just a few examples of psychological processes that would help explain the relationships between the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and experience links of the people who remain reliant, despite distrust. Similarly, as I outlined earlier, comparative studies between countries or regulatory circumstances could clarify how the institutional setting may shape the awareness-behaviour relationship. Lastly, researching the roles of emergent alternatives like decentralised platforms may help understand if structural change can affect digital reliance use, in relation to monetary and people reliance regulations.

Conclusion

In summary, this study has demonstrated that awareness of monopolistic practices employed by Big Tech does not necessarily mean a reduction in usage engagement and loyalty. In fact, awareness of these monopolistic practices is associated with reduced trust, but higher usage and greater spending behaviours. Demonstrating a largely contradictory behaviour. The role of demographics further complicates this relationship, whereby younger, wealthier, and more educated groups continued to display the greatest awareness of monopolistic practices, but perceived less digital reliance than other groups. Overall, this study has substantiated that reliance on Big Tech is not simply a matter of ignorance but systemic entrenchment.

The key takeaway of my research is that knowledge alone is simply not enough to challenge Big Tech's monopoly practices. Consumers may know and understand the risks involved, but without system-level change, awareness of monopolistic practices perpetuates consumer dependency on those products and services. Affording and creating alternatives that make ethical digital engagement possible and proactive is necessary to bridge the gap in

meaningfully acting beyond awareness. Only through systemic intervention can awareness be translated into meaningful awareness-based actions and interventions.

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