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From Storytelling to Social Influence: A Conceptual Model of Digital Marketing Effects on Purchase Decisions via Customer Knowledge

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Abstract

This study addresses the growing complexity of digital consumer behavior by examining why digital marketing strategies do not always translate directly into purchase decisions, despite their increasing sophistication. Existing research often assumes a direct relationship between marketing stimuli and behavioral outcomes, overlooking the role of internal cognitive mechanisms that shape consumer responses. To address this gap, this paper adopts a conceptual approach to develop a model grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, positioning storytelling, Key Opinion Leader (KOL), and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as stimuli, customer knowledge as the organism, and purchase decision as the response. The proposed framework suggests that digital marketing stimuli influence purchase decisions through both direct and indirect pathways, with customer knowledge serving as a key mediating variable. Specifically, storytelling enhances knowledge through narrative processing, KOL influences knowledge via credibility and trust, and eWOM contributes through informational and social proof mechanisms. These cognitive processes, in turn, reduce uncertainty and improve decision confidence, leading to purchase decisions. The study contributes theoretically by extending the SOR framework beyond affective responses and integrating multiple digital marketing elements within a unified cognitive-based model. It also highlights the central role of customer knowledge as a mechanism linking external stimuli to behavioral outcomes. From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that digital marketing strategies should prioritize educating consumers and facilitating knowledge formation rather than relying solely on persuasive tactics.

Keywords: *Keywords: storytelling marketing; key opinion leader; electronic word-of-mouth; customer knowledge; purchase decision*.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior, making it increasingly complex, dynamic, and difficult to predict. In Indonesia, this transformation is particularly evident. Recent data indicate that internet users have surpassed 230 million, with a penetration rate reaching 80.5% [1]. In parallel, the average duration of social media usage has reached 3 hours and 7 minutes per day, significantly higher than the global average of 2 hours and 39 minutes. Social media engagement has become deeply embedded in daily routines, particularly among Generation Z, with 63% reporting that scrolling through social media is their primary leisure activity. More importantly, this behavioral shift translates into consumption patterns: 49% of Gen Z report increased clothing purchases influenced by social media, 34% purchase more beauty products, and 31% increase spending on technology.

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Furthermore, 94% of Indonesian consumers acknowledge that their purchase decisions are influenced by influencer recommendations, as reported by YouGov in collaboration with Vero Indonesia [2].

These trends highlight the growing importance of digital marketing strategies such as storytelling, Key Opinion Leader (KOL) endorsements, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in shaping consumer decisions. However, despite the intensity of exposure, the relationship between digital marketing stimuli and purchase decisions is far from straightforward. In contemporary digital environments, consumers are not merely influenced by the volume of information but are increasingly challenged by it. The phenomenon of information overload has become a defining characteristic of digital consumption, where excessive exposure to content, advertisements, and recommendations overwhelms consumers' cognitive capacity. Prior research demonstrates that information overload impairs systematic thinking, triggers decision fatigue, and ultimately reduces the quality of decision-making [3]. In fact, excessive marketing exposure may weaken rather than strengthen marketing effectiveness [4]. This suggests that increased visibility and engagement do not automatically translate into purchase decisions, but may instead create confusion and hesitation.

In addition to information overload, growing consumer skepticism further complicates the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies. In an environment saturated with influencer content and promotional messages, consumers no longer respond directly to marketing stimuli. Instead, the influence of such stimuli depends on how consumers interpret and process product-related information. Prior studies indicate that the impact of influencer marketing and eWOM is mediated by product knowledge, which shapes evaluation and purchase intention [5], [6]. This shift reflects a broader transformation in consumer behavior, where individuals act not only as emotional responders but also as active information processors.

This complexity challenges the adequacy of traditional stimulus–response assumptions. Contemporary research shows that the customer journey is no longer linear but non-sequential, dynamic, and context-dependent. Consumers may skip, revisit, or ignore stages in the decision-making process, resulting in what has been described as a "complex maze of touchpoints" [7], [8], [9]. Consequently, models that assume a direct and linear relationship between marketing stimuli and behavioral responses are insufficient to explain modern consumer behavior.

The Stimulus-Organism–Response (SOR) framework provides a useful theoretical foundation for addressing this complexity. However, a critical limitation of existing SOR-based research lies in its strong emphasis on affective mechanisms. Since its introduction by Albert Mehrabian and James A. Russell [10], the organism component has been predominantly conceptualized in terms of emotional states such as feelings, attitudes, and trust. This tendency persists in contemporary digital marketing studies, where affective variables continue to dominate explanations of consumer behavior. While these dimensions are important, such an approach provides only a partial understanding of decision-making processes in information-rich environments. In digital contexts, consumers are required not only to feel but also to think by evaluating information, assessing credibility, and constructing meaningful understanding before making decisions.

To address this limitation, this study proposes a conceptual shift by positioning

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customer knowledge as a central cognitive mechanism within the SOR framework. Customer knowledge refers to the knowledge consumers possess about products or services, formed through both information and experience. It encompasses explicit knowledge, which can be formally communicated, and tacit knowledge, which is experiential and personal [11]. Moreover, customer knowledge is dynamic and socially constructed through interaction and usage practices [12]. Closely related to this concept, product knowledge reflects consumers' understanding of product attributes, benefits, and usage, which directly influences evaluation and decision-making processes [13]. In digital environments characterized by information abundance, the ability to construct structured knowledge becomes essential for reducing uncertainty and enabling informed decisions.

Accordingly, this study aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how digital marketing strategies influence purchase decisions through the mediating role of customer knowledge within the SOR framework. By shifting the analytical focus from affective dominance to cognitive centrality, this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it extends the SOR framework by incorporating a cognitive dimension that has been underrepresented in prior research. Second, it integrates multiple digital marketing stimuli within a unified theoretical model, addressing the fragmentation of existing studies. Third, it provides contextually grounded insights by reflecting the dynamics of consumer behavior in emerging markets such as Indonesia.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies depends not only on their ability to attract attention or evoke emotional engagement but also on their capacity to facilitate meaningful knowledge formation. In increasingly complex digital environments, consumers are more likely to make purchase decisions when they are equipped with relevant, credible, and well-structured knowledge rather than being driven solely by persuasive or emotional appeals.

In line with this objective, this study adopts a conceptual research approach to develop a theory-driven model grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. The model is developed through a critical review of relevant literature in digital marketing and consumer behavior, with a particular focus on the role of customer knowledge in shaping purchase decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Framework

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework explains how external stimuli influence behavior through internal psychological states. Since its introduction by Albert Mehrabian and James A. Russell [10], the model has been widely applied in marketing to understand how stimuli shape consumer responses [14]. However, prior studies predominantly conceptualize the organism component in affective terms, such as emotions, attitudes, and trust [15].

While this affective focus provides useful insights, it is insufficient in digital environments characterized by high information complexity. Consumers are not only emotional responders but also active information processors who evaluate and synthesize information before making decisions [16]. Therefore, the organism component needs to be extended beyond affective responses by incorporating cognitive

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mechanisms, particularly customer knowledge.

Digital Marketing Stimuli

Digital marketing stimuli refer to communication strategies designed to influence consumer decision-making. Among these, storytelling, Key Opinion Leader (KOL) marketing, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) represent key stimuli that operate through distinct yet complementary mechanisms.

Storytelling marketing is grounded in narrative persuasion, which suggests that consumers become immersed in narratives, leading to enhanced engagement and reduced resistance to persuasion [17], [18]. Beyond emotional engagement, storytelling facilitates deeper information processing, enabling consumers to extract and internalize product-related knowledge, particularly when narratives are relevant and informative [19]. KOL marketing relies on source credibility theory, where message effectiveness depends on perceived expertise and trustworthiness [5]. In digital environments, influencers act not only as persuasive agents but also as information intermediaries who translate and simplify product knowledge. This dual role enhances consumers' understanding and supports decision-making through cognitive as well as affective mechanisms [20].

eWOM represents user-generated information that influences consumer behavior through informational and social influence. Consumers rely on online reviews and recommendations to reduce uncertainty and validate decisions [21], [22]. Importantly, eWOM contributes to knowledge formation by providing diverse and experience-based information, which consumers integrate into their evaluation processes.

Customer Knowledge

In this study, customer knowledge is defined as a structured cognitive representation of product-related information that consumers develop through the interpretation and integration of various information sources. Unlike information processing, which refers to cognitive activities, or product knowledge, which reflects the level of information possessed, customer knowledge represents the outcome of these processes in the form of organized and meaningful understanding [23]. This construct encompasses both explicit knowledge derived from external sources and tacit knowledge shaped by personal experience [12]. In digital environments characterized by information overload, the ability to transform fragmented information into structured knowledge becomes essential for reducing uncertainty and supporting decision-making [11]. Therefore, within the SOR framework, customer knowledge functions as a key cognitive mediator that enables consumers to evaluate information and make more informed purchase decision.

Purchase Decision

Purchase decision represents the behavioral outcome in the SOR framework. In digital environments, decision-making is increasingly non-linear and dynamic, shaped by continuous information exposure and interaction [7], [24].

Importantly, decisions are not driven solely by emotions but also by cognitive evaluation. Consumers assess the relevance, credibility, and usefulness of information before making choices [16]. In this process, customer knowledge plays a central role by enabling more confident and informed decisions. Therefore, purchase decisions are

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better understood as the result of knowledge-based evaluation rather than direct responses to marketing stimuli.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The proposed conceptual model (Figure 1) is grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, positioning storytelling, Key Opinion Leader (KOL) influence, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as stimuli, customer knowledge as the organism, and purchase decision as the response. Unlike traditional SOR applications that emphasize affective responses, this study highlights cognitive mechanisms, arguing that digital marketing effectiveness depends on the extent to which stimuli facilitate meaningful knowledge formation rather than direct persuasion.

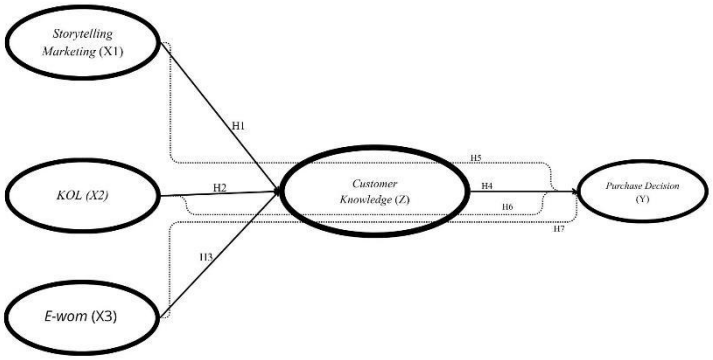

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model

Storytelling marketing facilitates consumer engagement through narrative immersion [17], [18]. However, its effectiveness in influencing behavior remains inconsistent, suggesting that emotional engagement alone is insufficient [25]. Instead, storytelling contributes to decision-making when it enhances understanding by embedding relevant and meaningful product information.

H1: Storytelling marketing positively influences customer knowledge by facilitating narrative-based information processing and enhancing the integration of product-related information.

Key Opinion Leader (KOL) influence is traditionally explained through source credibility theory [26]. While credibility can build trust, recent research indicates growing consumer skepticism toward influencer content in saturated digital environments. This suggests that credibility alone is insufficient unless it is accompanied by meaningful knowledge transfer.

H2: Key Opinion Leader (KOL) influence positively affects customer knowledge by enhancing the credibility and interpretability of product-related information.

Similarly, eWOM enhances customer knowledge by providing experience-based and peer-generated information. Consumers rely on eWOM to reduce uncertainty and evaluate products, thereby strengthening their knowledge structures.

H3: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) positively influences customer knowledge by providing diverse and experience-based information that supports consumer

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evaluation.

Customer knowledge plays a central role in consumer decision-making by enabling individuals to evaluate information, reduce uncertainty, and make informed choices [23]. In digital environments characterized by high information complexity, decisions increasingly rely on cognitive evaluation rather than immediate emotional responses [16]. In this regard, customer knowledge becomes a critical determinant of purchase decisions, as it enhances decision confidence and allows consumers to make more deliberate and informed choices.

H4: Customer knowledge positively affects purchase decisions by reducing uncertainty and increasing decision confidence.

Mediating Role of Customer Knowledge

Within the SOR framework, stimuli do not directly determine behavioral responses but operate through internal mechanisms. While prior research emphasizes affective mediators such as trust and satisfaction [15], this study argues that cognitive mediation is more critical in digital contexts.

Storytelling → Customer Knowledge → Purchase Decision

Storytelling facilitates knowledge formation by embedding product information within coherent and meaningful narratives. Through narrative processing, consumers are able to integrate information into structured knowledge, which enhances their ability to evaluate products and increases the likelihood of purchase decisions. Without sufficient knowledge formation, storytelling may remain at the level of engagement without influencing behavior.

H5: Customer knowledge mediates the relationship between storytelling marketing and purchase decisions, such that storytelling influences decisions indirectly through knowledge formation.

Key Opinion Leader → Customer Knowledge → Purchase Decision

KOL influence contributes to purchase decisions through its role in enhancing customer knowledge. By delivering credible and experience-based information, KOLs enable consumers to better understand product value, reduce ambiguity, and strengthen decision confidence. This cognitive enrichment is essential for translating exposure into actual purchase behavior.

H6: Customer knowledge mediates the relationship between KOL influence and purchase decisions by translating credible information into structured understanding.

eWOM → Customer Knowledge → Purchase Decision

eWOM influences purchase decisions through knowledge accumulation derived from peer-generated information. Consumers rely on reviews and recommendations to evaluate product attributes and reduce perceived risk. This process strengthens knowledge structures, which in turn supports more accurate and confident purchase decisions.

H7: Customer knowledge mediates the relationship between eWOM and purchase decisions by enabling consumers to integrate peer-generated information into

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decision-relevant knowledge.

This study challenges the dominant assumption that digital marketing stimuli directly drive purchase decisions, proposing instead that their effectiveness depends on their ability to generate actionable customer knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The proposed conceptual model provides a more nuanced explanation of how digital marketing strategies influence purchase decisions by emphasizing cognitive mechanisms within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. Rather than treating storytelling, Key Opinion Leader (KOL) influence, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as direct drivers of behavior, this study conceptualizes them as complementary stimuli that shape customer knowledge, which subsequently determines purchase decisions. This perspective challenges the dominant assumption of linear stimulus–response relationships and instead adopts a process-oriented view of consumer behavior in digital environments.

This study both aligns with and extends prior research. Existing studies have shown that storytelling enhances engagement [18], KOLs build trust [26], and eWOM strengthens perceived credibility [22]. However, much of this literature implicitly assumes that these factors directly influence purchase decisions, often through affective mediators such as attitude or trust. Such explanations are increasingly insufficient in digital environments characterized by high information complexity, where consumers are required to actively evaluate and interpret information rather than respond passively.

By positioning customer knowledge as a central mediating mechanism, this study challenges the dominance of affective explanations in SOR-based research. Consumers are conceptualized not merely as emotional responders but as active information processors who evaluate, compare, and synthesize diverse sources of information before making decisions. In this context, customer knowledge functions as a critical resource that reduces uncertainty and enhances decision confidence. This perspective extends the SOR framework by integrating cognitive processes into the organism component, offering a more balanced explanation of consumer behavior.

Another key contribution lies in the integrative treatment of digital marketing stimuli. Prior research tends to examine storytelling, KOL influence, and eWOM in isolation, resulting in fragmented findings. In contrast, this study reflects the reality of digital environments, where consumers are simultaneously exposed to multiple and overlapping sources of information. These stimuli interact and reinforce one another, collectively shaping knowledge formation. By integrating these elements into a unified framework, the model provides a more holistic understanding of how consumer perceptions and decisions are constructed.

Furthermore, the model offers a plausible explanation for the inconsistent findings reported in prior empirical studies. The effectiveness of digital marketing strategies may vary depending on their ability to facilitate meaningful knowledge formation. For instance, storytelling that is emotionally engaging but lacks informational value may fail to influence behavior, while eWOM that provides rich and diagnostic information may have a stronger impact. Similarly, KOL credibility without

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substantive knowledge transfer may generate trust but not necessarily lead to purchase decisions. These insights suggest that exposure and persuasion alone are insufficient without cognitive processing.

Despite these contributions, the applicability of the model may vary across different contexts, particularly in relation to the level of consumer involvement. For high-involvement products, such as technology or fashion, consumers tend to engage in extensive information processing, making customer knowledge a critical determinant of decision-making. In such contexts, the mediating role of knowledge is likely to be strong, as consumers actively evaluate product attributes and rely on structured understanding to reduce uncertainty. In contrast, for low-involvement products, such as everyday household goods, decision-making is often more heuristic and habitual. Consumers may rely on simple cues such as brand familiarity or price, with limited cognitive effort. In these situations, the influence of digital marketing stimuli may operate more through affective or peripheral mechanisms, reducing the relative importance of customer knowledge. This distinction is consistent with dual-process perspectives of consumer behavior, which suggest that individuals adopt different processing strategies depending on their level of involvement.

In sum, this study advances the literature by demonstrating that the effectiveness of digital marketing lies not in its ability to directly influence consumers, but in its capacity to support knowledge formation. At the same time, the strength of this mechanism is context-dependent, being more pronounced in high-involvement decision-making situations. By shifting the focus from affective dominance to cognitive centrality while acknowledging its boundary conditions, the model provides a more comprehensive and realistic explanation of consumer behavior in complex digital environments.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATION

This study contributes to the literature by extending the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework through the incorporation of customer knowledge as a central cognitive component within the organism dimension. While prior SOR-based studies have predominantly emphasized affective states such as emotions, attitudes, and trust [15], this study highlights the critical role of cognitive processes in explaining how marketing stimuli are internalized and translated into behavioral outcomes. By doing so, it advances a more balanced perspective that integrates both cognition and affect in understanding consumer responses.

Furthermore, this study contributes to digital marketing and consumer behavior literature by integrating storytelling, Key Opinion Leader (KOL) influence, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) within a unified framework. Unlike prior research that examines these elements in isolation, this integrative approach reflects the interconnected nature of digital environments and offers a more comprehensive explanation of marketing effectiveness.

Importantly, by positioning customer knowledge as a key mediating mechanism, this study shifts the focus from mere persuasive exposure to the process of meaningful knowledge formation. This perspective helps explain inconsistencies in prior findings by suggesting that consumer responses depend not only on how information is presented, but also on how it is cognitively processed and structured.

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Finally, this study introduces a boundary condition by proposing that the role of customer knowledge is more pronounced in high-involvement contexts, where consumers engage in deeper information processing, and less influential in low-involvement situations characterized by heuristic decision-making. This insight refines the applicability of the model and provides directions for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study develops a conceptual model, grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, to explain how digital marketing strategies storytelling, Key Opinion Leader (KOL) influence, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) affect purchase decisions through the mediating role of customer knowledge. By positioning customer knowledge as a central cognitive mechanism, the study moves beyond dominant affective perspectives and emphasizes that purchase decisions are shaped by structured information processing rather than immediate emotional responses. The model contributes to the literature by integrating multiple digital marketing elements within a single, cognitively oriented framework, offering a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in complex digital environments. However, as a conceptual study, the model requires empirical validation, and future research is encouraged to test the proposed relationships, incorporate potential moderating variables, and further explore the interaction between cognitive and affective processes. In increasingly complex digital environments, understanding how consumers build knowledge is essential for both theory and practice.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI (if any)

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT for writing assistance and DeepL for language translation. All outputs were carefully reviewed and revised to ensure academic accuracy and integrity. The author takes full responsibility for the final content.

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