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Consumer Behavior in the Digital Era: A Literature Review of Environmental Factors and Electronic Word-of-Mouth

*Perilaku Konsumen pada Era Digital: Tinjauan Literatur
tentang Faktor Lingkungan dan Electronic Word-of-Mouth*

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed consumer purchasing behavior, shifting trust from traditional advertising toward digital communities and user-generated content. This study aims to analyze the influence of consumer environmental factors and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM) on purchasing decisions in the digital era through a literature review approach. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method by synthesizing books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and industry reports published between 2016 and 2025. The analysis focuses on four consumer environmental dimensions, namely cultural, social, demographic, and economic factors, as well as the roles of family, reference groups, and E-WOM in shaping consumer behavior. The findings indicate that purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by authenticity, digital social interaction, and value-oriented consumption. Community-based E-WOM emerges as the most trusted information source, followed by micro and nano influencers, while mega influencers primarily contribute to brand awareness. This study highlights the strategic importance of community-led marketing in strengthening consumer trust and supporting more effective digital marketing strategies.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior; Digital Marketing; Electronic Word-of-Mouth; Reference Group; Literature Review

Abstrak

Perkembangan pesat teknologi digital telah mengubah secara mendasar perilaku pembelian konsumen, sehingga kepercayaan bergeser dari iklan tradisional ke komunitas digital dan konten yang dibuat pengguna. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh faktor lingkungan konsumen dan Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM) terhadap keputusan pembelian di era digital melalui pendekatan tinjauan pustaka. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan mensintesis buku, artikel jurnal yang telah ditelaah sejawat, dan laporan industri yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2016 dan 2025. Analisis ini berfokus pada empat dimensi lingkungan konsumen, yaitu faktor budaya, sosial, demografis, dan ekonomi, serta peran keluarga, kelompok rujukan, dan E-WOM dalam membentuk perilaku konsumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa keputusan pembelian semakin dipengaruhi oleh keaslian, interaksi sosial digital, dan konsumsi yang berorientasi pada nilai. E-WOM berbasis komunitas muncul sebagai sumber informasi yang paling dipercaya, diikuti oleh mikro dan nano influencer, sementara mega influencer terutama berkontribusi pada kesadaran merek. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya strategis pemasaran yang dipimpin komunitas dalam memperkuat kepercayaan konsumen dan mendukung strategi pemasaran digital yang lebih efektif.

Kata Kunci: Perilaku Konsumen; Pemasaran Digital; Electronic Word-of-Mouth; Kelompok Acuan; Studi Literatur



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information technology, the internet, and social media has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior in acquiring information prior to making purchasing decisions. While consumers in the conventional marketing era primarily relied on television advertisements, radio, printed media, and recommendations from salespersons, information search has now shifted toward various digital platforms, including social media, online marketplaces, discussion forums, and online customer reviews.¹ This transformation indicates that consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing information but have become active participants who seek, compare, evaluate, and validate alternative products before making purchasing decisions. Consumer behavior encompasses a series of activities through which individuals search for, purchase, use, evaluate, and dispose of products or services to satisfy their needs and wants.² Within the digital environment, purchasing decisions are increasingly shaped by broad access to information, consumer interactions, and communication technologies that facilitate rapid and borderless information exchange.

This transformation is particularly evident among Generation Z, a consumer segment that has grown alongside the expansion of the internet and social media. Prior to purchasing a product, Generation Z consumers typically search for information across multiple digital platforms, read customer reviews, watch product review videos, compare the experiences of other users, and participate in online communities. A YouGov report published in 2025 indicates that most Indonesian consumers place greater trust in user-generated content than in promotional content produced by influencers or companies.³ This finding suggests that authenticity has become a key determinant in establishing consumer trust. Furthermore, these changes demonstrate that purchasing decisions are no longer influenced solely by individual characteristics but are increasingly shaped by the digital environment, which influences consumers' perceptions, preferences, and confidence toward products and services.

The evolution of consumer behavior has also accelerated the development of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM), defined as consumer-to-consumer communication through electronic media that contains experiences, evaluations, and recommendations regarding products or services. Unlike traditional marketing communication, which is predominantly one-way, E-WOM enables consumers to access information derived from actual user experiences, making it more objective and credible.⁴ In addition to E-WOM, companies increasingly employ influencer marketing strategies through micro, nano, and mega influencers to communicate with consumers. The effectiveness of each influencer category depends on credibility, audience proximity, and content relevance. Simultaneously, the expansion of social media has transformed the role of reference groups from direct interpersonal relationships into digital communities that significantly influence consumers' information search, product evaluation, and purchasing decision-making processes.

A synthesis of the literature on digital consumer behavior indicates that Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM) communities have become the most trusted source of information among

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- 1 Prakash Singh et al., "How Information Technology (IT) Is Shaping Consumer Behavior in the Digital Age: A Systematic Review and Future Research Directions," *Sustainability* 16, no. 4 (February 12, 2024): 1556, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16041556>.
 - 2 Marko Šostar and Vladimir Ristanović, "Assessment of Influencing Factors on Consumer Behavior Using the AHP Model," *Sustainability* 15, no. 13 (June 30, 2023): 10341, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151310341>.
 - 3 Nic Newman et al., *Digital News Report 2025* (Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism, 2025).
 - 4 Hongfei Liu et al., "Electronic Word of Mouth 2.0 (EWOM 2.0) – The Evolution of EWOM Research in the New Age," *Journal of Business Research* 176 (April 2024): 114587, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114587>.

young consumers, accounting for approximately 55% of consumer trust. Meanwhile, micro and nano influencers contribute around 25% because they are perceived as more authentic, relatable, and credible by their audiences. In contrast, mega influencers account for only about 20% of consumer trust and primarily contribute to increasing brand awareness rather than directly influencing purchase confidence.⁵ These findings suggest a substantial shift in consumer trust from company-controlled marketing communications toward organic recommendations generated within digital communities. Consequently, community-led marketing has emerged as a more relevant strategic approach for fostering trust and encouraging the natural dissemination of Electronic Word-of-Mouth in the contemporary digital marketplace.

Research on Electronic Word-of-Mouth has demonstrated that information quality, source credibility, and information usefulness positively influence consumers' purchase intentions through social media.⁶ However, these studies have primarily focused on the relationship between E-WOM and purchase intention without considering broader consumer environmental factors. Research on Generation Z purchasing behavior has also found that social media significantly influences purchasing decisions through digital content, yet it has largely concentrated on impulsive buying within specific product categories.⁷ More recent studies have further revealed that E-WOM has evolved into a mechanism for consumer engagement within digital communities; however, these studies have not integrated the changing roles of reference groups, family, and consumer environmental factors into a comprehensive conceptual framework. Consequently, there remains substantial room for further development in understanding consumer behavior within the contemporary digital environment.

Based on previous studies, existing discussions of digital consumer behavior remain fragmented by examining Electronic Word-of-Mouth, influencer marketing, and reference groups as separate constructs. In reality, purchasing decisions emerge from the interaction of cultural, social, demographic, economic, family, and reference group factors that collectively shape consumer behavior. Within the digital ecosystem, online communities have evolved into new reference groups that play a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions, trust, and product evaluations before purchase decisions are made.⁸ Therefore, a comprehensive review integrating consumer environmental factors with the development of Electronic Word-of-Mouth is necessary to provide a broader understanding of the transformation of consumer behavior in the digital era.

Based on these phenomena and the identified research gap, this study aims to analyze contemporary consumer behavior in the digital era through a literature review focusing on the influence of consumer environmental factors, family, reference groups, and Electronic Word-of-Mouth on purchasing decisions. This study offers a conceptual synthesis that integrates consumer environmental factors with the transformation of digital reference groups and the evolution of Electronic Word-of-Mouth in explaining changes in consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Z. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich consumer

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- 5 L.M.D.O Wimalasena and D.M.R Dissanayake, "Mapping the Themes and Intellectual Structure of Micro-Influencers: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *F1000Research* 15 (January 16, 2026): 70, <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.175286.1>.
 - 6 Thi Thuy An Ngo et al., "Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM) on Social Networking Sites (SNS): Roles of Information Credibility in Shaping Online Purchase Intention," *Heliyon* 10, no. 11 (June 2024): e32168, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e32168>.
 - 7 Sabakun Naher Shetu, "Do User-Generated Content and Micro-Celebrity Posts Encourage Generation Z Users to Search Online Shopping Behavior on Social Networking Sites—the Moderating Role of Sponsored Ads," *Future Business Journal* 9, no. 1 (December 2, 2023): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-023-00276-3>.
 - 8 Wilson Ozuem et al., "Determinants of Online Brand Communities' and Millennials' Characteristics: A Social Influence Perspective," *Psychology and Marketing* 38, no. 5 (2021): 794–818, <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21470>.

behavior literature by integrating multiple determinants of purchasing decisions within digital environments. Practically, the findings are expected to provide valuable insights for business practitioners in designing community-based digital marketing strategies capable of strengthening consumer trust and enhancing marketing communication effectiveness in an increasingly dynamic digital ecosystem.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a literature review design to examine contemporary consumer behavior in purchasing decision-making within the digital era.⁹ A literature review was selected because it enables the synthesis and critical integration of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from previous studies, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in digital environments. Relevant literature was retrieved from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, Google Scholar, and publisher websites. The search process used keywords such as *consumer behavior*, *Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM)*, *digital marketing*, *reference group*, *purchase decision*, and *Generation Z*. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, and industry reports published between 2016 and 2025 and directly related to the research topic were included in the analysis.

The data used in this study consisted exclusively of secondary sources obtained through a systematic documentation process. The literature selection involved identifying, screening, reading, and evaluating publications based on their relevance, methodological quality, and conceptual contribution to the research objectives. Publications that contained duplicate information, lacked academic credibility, or discussed topics unrelated to consumer behavior in digital contexts were excluded from the review. The final body of literature comprised theoretical references, empirical journal articles, and industry reports addressing consumer environmental factors, family influence, reference groups, influencer marketing, and Electronic Word-of-Mouth. These sources provided a comprehensive foundation for understanding the transformation of purchasing behavior among Generation Z within contemporary digital ecosystems.

The collected literature was analyzed using qualitative content analysis through an iterative coding process that classified findings into several analytical themes, including cultural, social, demographic, economic, family, reference group, and Electronic Word-of-Mouth factors. The thematic findings were subsequently compared and synthesized to identify conceptual relationships, recurring patterns, and emerging perspectives regarding consumer purchasing behavior in digital environments. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, cross-source verification was conducted by comparing evidence derived from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and industry reports. This analytical procedure enabled the development of a comprehensive conceptual synthesis while minimizing potential bias arising from reliance on a single category of literature or information source.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Consumer Environmental Factors Influencing Purchasing Decisions in the Digital Era

The rapid advancement of digital technology has not only transformed the platforms through which consumers purchase products but has also reshaped the environments that influence purchasing decisions. In the past, consumer decisions were primarily shaped by immediate social

9 Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2008).

surroundings, including family, friends, and company-driven marketing activities.¹⁰ Today, however, digital environments have become the primary source of information throughout the decision-making process.¹¹ Consumers actively gather information from social media, online marketplaces, discussion forums, and customer reviews before selecting a product. Consequently, purchasing decisions are no longer determined by a single factor but emerge from the interaction of cultural, social, demographic, economic, family, and reference group influences, all of which have evolved alongside the rapid development of digital technologies.

These transformations are particularly evident in cultural and social factors, which have experienced the most significant changes. Consumption culture, once closely associated with social status and brand prestige, has gradually shifted toward values emphasizing authenticity, transparency, and genuine user experiences. Consumers are no longer easily persuaded by company-generated promotional messages but instead place greater trust in the experiences shared by other consumers through digital platforms. At the same time, the social environment has expanded beyond geographical boundaries as social media enables individuals to interact with large communities of users who share similar interests and experiences. As a result, product evaluations are increasingly shaped by digital interactions rather than traditional marketing communication.

Table 1. Summarizes the transformation of consumer environmental factors in the digital era.

Factor	Before the Digital Era	Digital Era
Culture	Social status and brand prestige	Authenticity, transparency, and user experience
Social	Family and friends	Digital communities and social media
Demographic	Differences in age and consumer characteristics	Dominance of Generation Z as digital natives
Economic	Price-oriented purchasing	Value-for-money orientation
Family	Primary source of information	Foundation of consumption values
Reference Group	Friends and immediate social environment	Online communities, customer reviews, and digital forums

Source: Author (2026)

The transformation presented in Table 1 illustrates that each environmental factor has assumed a different role compared with the conventional marketing era. Cultural values no longer shape purchasing decisions through symbolic status but through authentic experiences perceived by consumers. Likewise, social influence has evolved from interpersonal interactions into digitally connected communities that facilitate rapid and transparent information exchange. Demographic characteristics have also contributed to this transformation, with Generation Z emerging as the consumer segment most accustomed to digital technologies and online information searching. As a result, purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by digital environments rather than face-to-face interactions that traditionally characterized consumer behavior.

10 Johye Hwang and Jin young Kim, "Food Tourists' Connectivity through the 5A Journey and Advocacy: Comparison between Generations Y and X," *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 25, no. 1 (2020): 27–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2019.1580756>.

11 Anastasia Kozyreva, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ralph Hertwig, "Citizens Versus the Internet: Confronting Digital Challenges With Cognitive Tools," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 21, no. 3 (December 16, 2020): 103–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100620946707>.

Economic considerations have also evolved considerably within digital marketplaces. Consumers no longer evaluate products solely on the basis of price but increasingly assess the balance between price, quality, functionality, and overall value.¹² The widespread availability of online price comparisons, customer reviews, and promotional information has encouraged consumers to become more rational and selective throughout the purchasing process. Consequently, businesses can no longer compete exclusively through pricing strategies but must also deliver superior value and customer experiences that justify purchasing decisions. This development demonstrates that economic considerations in the digital era are closely intertwined with the accessibility and transparency of online information.

Family and reference groups continue to influence consumer behavior, although their roles have changed substantially. Families now primarily function as the foundation for developing consumption values and financial attitudes, whereas information searching, product evaluation, and purchase validation are increasingly conducted through digital reference groups.¹³ Online communities, discussion forums, social networking platforms, and customer reviews have gradually replaced the influence previously exercised by friends and immediate social circles. This shift indicates that digital environments have become the primary space in which consumer trust is established before purchasing decisions are made. Therefore, understanding the transformation of reference groups in the digital era requires further discussion of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM), which has emerged as one of the most influential sources of information shaping contemporary consumer purchasing decisions.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth and the Transformation of Consumer Trust in the Digital Era

The transformation of consumer environmental factors discussed in the previous section has also reshaped the way consumers establish trust in products and brands. In the conventional marketing era, purchasing decisions were primarily influenced by information provided by companies, family members, or close friends.¹⁴ However, the rapid expansion of digital media has significantly broadened these information sources through online communities and digital platforms. Consumers no longer passively receive marketing messages but actively search for the experiences and opinions of other users before making purchasing decisions. Consequently, trust has become a critical determinant of consumer decision-making. The higher the level of trust placed in a particular source of information, the greater its influence on product evaluation and purchasing behavior.¹⁵ As a result, consumer trust in the digital era is increasingly built through interactions among consumers rather than through company-controlled marketing communication.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM) has emerged as one of the most effective forms of communication in building consumer trust because it is based on genuine user experiences. Unlike advertising and promotional campaigns created by companies, information shared

12 Ching-Hui (Joan) Su et al., "U.S. Sustainable Food Market Generation Z Consumer Segments," *Sustainability* 11, no. 13 (June 30, 2019): 3607, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11133607>.

13 Jennifer K. Rea et al., "Being Able to Support Yourself: Young Adults' Meaning of Financial Well-Being Through Family Financial Socialization," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 40, no. 2 (June 19, 2019): 250–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-018-9602-7>.

14 Ryan Hamilton et al., "Traveling with Companions: The Social Customer Journey," *Journal of Marketing* 85, no. 1 (January 31, 2021): 68–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920908227>.

15 Elvira Ismagilova et al., "The Effect of Characteristics of Source Credibility on Consumer Behaviour: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 53 (March 2020): 101736, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.005>.

through customer reviews, online discussion forums, and social media is generally perceived as more objective since it originates from consumers who have actually used the product. Beyond providing information about product quality, E-WOM also helps potential buyers reduce uncertainty before making purchasing decisions.¹⁶ The greater the number of positive experiences shared within digital communities, the stronger consumers' confidence in a product becomes. This phenomenon explains why modern consumers increasingly rely on customer reviews, user comments, and comparisons of multiple consumer experiences before completing online transactions. The shift in consumer trust toward different digital information sources is illustrated in Figure 1.

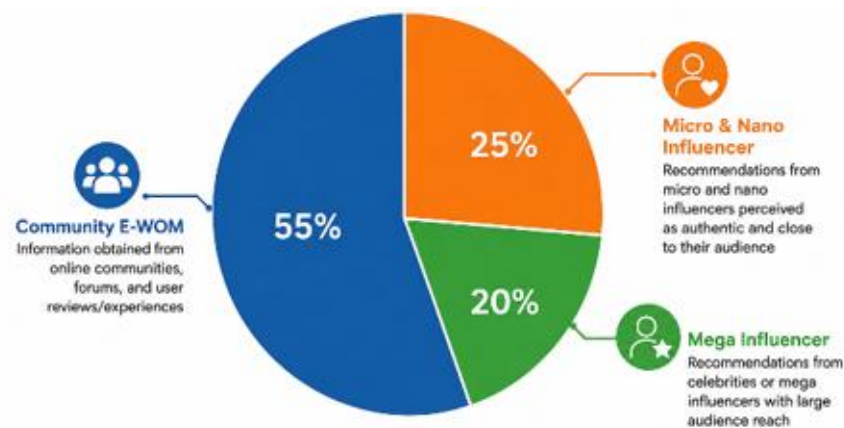


Figure 1. Consumer Trust in Digital Information Sources

Source: Authors' synthesis based on consumer behavior theories, Electronic Word-of-Mouth studies, and digital marketing trend reports.¹⁷

Figure 1 demonstrates that community-based Electronic Word-of-Mouth represents the most trusted source of information, accounting for approximately 55% of consumer trust. Meanwhile, micro and nano influencers contribute around 25% because they are perceived as more relatable and capable of delivering authentic experiences to their audiences. In contrast, mega influencers account for only about 20% of consumer trust, as much of their content is perceived as sponsored promotional material. This distribution indicates that modern consumers no longer consider popularity as the primary criterion when evaluating product-related information. Instead, they increasingly value authentic experiences, transparency, and naturally occurring interactions within digital communities. These findings suggest that digital communities have evolved into the primary reference groups influencing consumer purchasing decisions.

These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that information quality and source credibility are key determinants of the effectiveness of Electronic Word-of-Mouth in influencing purchasing decisions. However, existing research has primarily examined the relationship between information quality and consumers' purchase intentions. The present review indicates that the role of E-WOM extends beyond information quality and is closely associated with the transformation of reference groups in the digital era. Online communities

16 Sofik Handoyo, "Purchasing in the Digital Age: A Meta-Analytical Perspective on Trust, Risk, Security, and e-WOM in e-Commerce," *Heliyon* 10, no. 8 (April 2024): e29714, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e29714>.

17 Hongfei Liu et al., "Electronic Word of Mouth 2.0 (EWOM 2.0) – The Evolution of EWOM Research in the New Age," *Journal of Business Research* 176 (April 2024): 114587, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114587>; K. L. Kotler, P., & Keller, *Marketing Management (15th Ed.)* (Pearson Education, 2016); Ismail Erkan and Chris Evans, "Social Media or Shopping Websites? The Influence of EWOM on Consumers' Online Purchase Intentions," *Journal of Marketing Communications* 24, no. 6 (August 18, 2018): 617–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2016.1184706>.

no longer function merely as platforms for exchanging consumer experiences but have evolved into social environments where consumers build trust, validate information, and collectively shape perceptions of products before making purchasing decisions. Consequently, the function of digital communities has become substantially broader than simply facilitating consumer-to-consumer communication.

This transformation also explains why the use of mega influencers does not necessarily generate the highest level of consumer trust. Although mega influencers possess extensive audience reach, their relationships with followers are generally characterized by one-way communication, making promotional content more likely to be perceived as commercially motivated.¹⁸ In contrast, micro and nano influencers maintain stronger engagement and more personal interactions with their audiences, allowing their recommendations to be viewed as more credible and convincing. Nevertheless, the highest level of trust remains associated with Electronic Word-of-Mouth communities, where communication occurs among consumers who share direct experiences with products.¹⁹ These findings demonstrate that authenticity has become the most important factor in determining consumer trust within digital environments.

The findings also provide important managerial implications for businesses operating in increasingly competitive digital markets. Marketing strategies can no longer rely exclusively on advertising campaigns or celebrity endorsements to influence purchasing decisions. Instead, companies should foster active customer communities, enhance customer experiences, and encourage the organic dissemination of Electronic Word-of-Mouth through meaningful consumer interactions. The success of modern marketing strategies is therefore determined not only by promotional exposure but also by a company's ability to establish long-term relationships with consumers. Consequently, community-led marketing has emerged as a more relevant strategic approach for strengthening consumer trust, increasing customer loyalty, and encouraging purchasing decisions in the digital era. This transformation illustrates that the center of marketing communication has gradually shifted from companies toward consumer communities that collectively create, exchange, and validate marketplace information.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that consumer purchasing decisions in the digital era are no longer shaped solely by individual preferences or product attributes but emerge from the interaction of consumer environmental factors operating within digital ecosystems. Cultural values have shifted toward authenticity and transparency, social influence has expanded through online communities, demographic characteristics—particularly those of Generation Z—have accelerated the adoption of digital information sources, and economic considerations have evolved from price orientation to value-for-money evaluation. These transformations have fundamentally altered the structure of consumer trust, where Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM) has become the most influential source of purchasing information, surpassing the influence of both micro and mega influencers. This shift occurs because consumers increasingly perceive community-generated experiences as more credible, transparent, and relevant than company-controlled promotional communication. Consequently, purchasing decisions in the digital era are increasingly driven by trust developed through digital communities rather than conventional marketing activities.

18 Chen Lou, "Social Media Influencers and Followers: Theorization of a Trans-Parasocial Relation and Explication of Its Implications for Influencer Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 51, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 4–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1880345>.

19 Stephen W. Litvin, Ronald E. Goldsmith, and Bing Pan, "A Retrospective View of Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Hospitality and Tourism Management," *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 30, no. 1 (January 8, 2018): 313–25, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-08-2016-0461>.

This study contributes to consumer behavior literature by integrating consumer environmental factors with the transformation of digital reference groups and Electronic Word-of-Mouth into a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding purchasing decisions in digital environments. The findings also provide practical implications for businesses by highlighting the importance of community-led marketing strategies that encourage authentic customer interactions and organically generated Electronic Word-of-Mouth. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on a literature review approach and secondary data, preventing empirical validation of the proposed conceptual relationships. Future studies are therefore encouraged to employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches to examine the relationships among consumer environmental factors, digital reference groups, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, and purchasing decisions across different consumer segments, product categories, and digital platforms. Such investigations would provide broader empirical evidence and strengthen the theoretical understanding of consumer behavior in rapidly evolving digital marketplaces.

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