



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Evolution of Consumer Behavior in SMEs in Developing Cities: A Literature Review on the Impact of Digitalization in Gorontalo's Karawo

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ABSTRACT

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This literature review explores consumers' evolving behavior in the digital era, focusing on its impact on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), particularly those engaged in Gorontalo's Karawo embroidery craft. The review highlights how digitalization, including expanding internet connectivity and using data for personalization, has reshaped consumer decision-making processes. Consumers are now more informed and influenced by social media, peer reviews, and digital tools, which have replaced traditional advertising as the primary source of product information. Karawo SMEs, while representing a rich cultural heritage, face significant challenges in adopting digital technologies to remain competitive. Limited resources, lack of digital skills, and barriers to accessing new markets hinder their growth potential. The literature suggests that embracing digital transformation—utilizing e-commerce platforms and social media—can help Karawo SMEs expand their reach, strengthen their brand identity, and engage with consumers more effectively. Furthermore, ensuring data privacy and security is critical to building consumer trust, particularly in online transactions. The review concludes that Karawo SMEs must focus on building digital capabilities through online marketing and data analytics training, enabling them to better understand consumer behavior and optimize their marketing strategies. This holistic approach to digitalization is essential for SMEs to thrive in national and international markets.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has brought significant changes to various aspects of life, especially in consumer behavior and market dynamics (Hagberg et al., 2016), & Egels-Zanden, 2016). Digitalization encompasses various technological advancements, such as the growing reach of internet connectivity, the use of data for personalization, and the expansion of social networks that influence how consumers interact with products and services (Verhoef et al., 2021). This phenomenon affects consumers in global markets and profoundly impacts local markets (Rangaswamy & Toyama, 2006), including in developing cities like Gorontalo.

In this digital era, consumers are increasingly connected through online platforms, which expands their access to information and allows them to engage in more complex social interactions (Stephen, 2016). This creates new challenges for businesses, particularly in the MSME (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) sector, which often faces resource limitations (Imaduddin & Jufriadi, 2022).

Digitalization introduces a new dimension to consumer behavior analysis, where interactions with products no longer occur in isolated contexts but within broader social networks (Belk, 2013). This necessitates a deeper understanding of how purchasing behavior is influenced by social interactions and the digital environment (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

In the context of MSMEs in Indonesia, particularly in regions like Gorontalo, these changes are increasingly relevant (Menne et al., 2023). MSMEs play a crucial role in the local economy, yet they often face various challenges, such as limited resources, slow technology adoption, and difficulties in marketing (Tambunan, 2022). In Gorontalo, MSMEs that produce the region's distinctive hand-embroidered fabric, known as *Karawo*, face challenges in penetrating larger markets despite their significant potential (Niode et al., 2022). *Karawo* is not only a symbol of local culture but also holds opportunities for national and international growth (Isa, 2014).

Digital transformation offers opportunities for MSMEs to enhance their competitiveness (Bouwman, Nikou, & de Reuver, 2019). (Marino-Romero et al., 2024). However, the adoption of digital technologies by MSMEs is often delayed due to several barriers, including high production costs, inefficient distribution, and complex bureaucracy (Maroufkhani et al., 2023). Additionally, government policies and media support are often insufficient (Alifah et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding the impact of digitalization on consumer behavior in the MSME sector is critical to designing effective strategies to support the growth and sustainability of small and medium enterprises in developing cities like Gorontalo (Park & Nicolau, 2015).

This study aims to explore the impact of digitalization on consumer behavior with a focus on the MSME sector (*Karawo* craft) in Gorontalo (Alford & Page, 2017). The study highlights the changes occurring at the intersection of traditional market analysis and new dynamics introduced by modern, interconnected consumers (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). By combining perspectives from existing literature with specific case studies, this research aims to provide deeper insights into how consumer behavior has evolved and how MSMEs can adapt to these changes to capitalize on the opportunities presented in the digital era (Verhoef et al., 2021).

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

This literature review examines the evolution of consumer behavior in the digital era, highlighting how technological advancements have transformed purchasing patterns. The objective is to understand the scope and depth of digital impact across various consumer segments. The methodology systematically analyzes peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and empirical studies published over the past two decades. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of thematic developments in consumer behavior research.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Consumer decision-making processes

The changes in the consumer decision-making process have become a widely studied subject in this digital era (Xia et al., 2024). Digitalization has transformed how consumers obtain information and make purchasing decisions (Kannan & Li, 2017). Previously, consumers relied on limited information from traditional media such as television, newspapers, and magazine advertisements (Belch & Belch, 2018). However, with the advent of digital platforms like price comparison websites, e-commerce, and reviews from other consumers, the decision-making process has become more complex and interactive (Grewal & Levy, 2009) highlight that digital tools allow consumers to easily access product reviews, compare prices, and read recommendations from other buyers. This affects consumer preferences as they have broader access to information and product evaluations from various sources (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

Additionally, consumers are now more involved in data-driven and socially influenced purchasing decisions (Babić Rosario et al., 2016). User reviews on websites like Amazon or Tokopedia, for instance, have become a primary reference for many consumers when deciding on products to buy (Fileri, 2016). Consumers tend to trust the experiences of others shared online more than traditional commercial advertisements (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). They also increasingly rely on digital tools to gather product information, whether through search engines like Google or social media platforms (Akar & Topçu, 2019). (Akar & Topçu, 2011) With the growing consumer engagement in the digital

era, businesses, including MSMEs, must adapt to these changes to remain competitive in the market (Wu et al., 2023).

3.2 The role of social media

Social media has become a crucial element in consumer behavior in the digital era, significantly influencing preferences and purchasing decisions (Tuten, 2023). With platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter, consumers have a space to interact directly with brands and products (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). (Mention et al., 2019) notes that social media provides a platform for consumers to share experiences, reviews, and opinions about specific products or services. This process strengthens consumer-to-consumer dynamics, where purchasing decisions are often influenced by recommendations from friends, family, or even influencers who have sway on these platforms.

Social media also allows companies to engage more closely with their consumers. Through well-targeted digital marketing campaigns, companies can build brand awareness and customer loyalty and even boost sales (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). For MSMEs, social media is an extremely effective and economical tool to promote their products (Ainin et al., 2015). With much lower costs compared to traditional advertising, social media enables MSMEs to reach a broader audience with more personal and engaging content (Teng et al., 2022).

However, despite the many opportunities that social media offers, business owners must be cautious in their strategies (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Irrelevant or mismatched content with the target audience can negatively impact brand image (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). Therefore, it is important for MSMEs to design a focused social media strategy relevant to their consumers' needs and interests (Heller Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

3.3 Privacy concerns

With the increasing use of digital platforms, privacy and data security concerns are also on the rise. (Corbitt et al., 2003) show that privacy issues have become one of the main factors influencing consumer trust in the digital age. Many consumers are beginning to question the extent to which their personal data is used by companies, especially in the context of e-commerce and other digital platforms (K. E. Martin, 2020).

Consumers often face a dilemma between the convenience of digital technology and the risks of losing their privacy (Cummins et al., 2014). Personal information such as names, addresses, and payment details are typically required in online transactions, which can heighten concerns about data security. Cases of data breaches involving large companies have further increased consumer awareness of the importance of personal data protection (Institute, 2020). Consumers who feel that their data is insecure or misused by companies tend to reduce their engagement in digital transactions or even stop using those services altogether.

MSMEs in the digital era must also understand the importance of maintaining consumer privacy as part of their business strategy (Chamberlain et al., 2023). Implementing robust security systems and transparent privacy policies can help MSMEs build consumer trust (Fischer-Hübner et al., 2011). Additionally, companies must comply with data protection regulations in various jurisdictions to ensure they do not face legal sanctions related to consumer data management (Regan, 2022)



Figure 1: The connections between consumer decision-making processes, the role of social media, and privacy concerns in digital consumer behavior

The diagram illustrating the relationship between Consumer Decision-Making Processes, The Role of Social Media, and Privacy Concerns depicts the dynamics influencing consumer behavior in the digital era. These three interconnected themes form an interaction pattern that affects how consumers act and make decisions (Kumar et al., 2019); (Gupta et al., 2020). At the top of the diagram, the consumer decision-making process is the main focus, indicating that this process is influenced by various stages involving information gathering, evaluating alternatives, and ultimately deciding to

purchase a product or service (Solomon, 2020). In the digital context, consumers have broader access to information through online platforms or reviews from other users (Cummins et al., 2014). This vast availability of information, driven by digital technology, is a crucial factor in shaping consumer preferences and choices (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

The role of social media is highlighted in the diagram, where social media serves as a highly influential medium on consumer perceptions and attitudes. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and others provide spaces for consumers to interact with products and brands, share personal experiences, and receive influence from friends, family, or influencers (Mention et al., 2019). In this regard, social media is an information platform and a strong opinion shaper, ultimately influencing consumer decisions when selecting products (Chan, 2022). This relationship is clearly depicted in the diagram, where social media is directly connected to the decision-making process, demonstrating how strong social interactions influence consumer behavior patterns (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Privacy concerns have also significantly influenced consumer decisions ((Acquisti et al., 2016). In the digital era, where personal data is often used for marketing purposes, concerns regarding the security and privacy of personal information have heightened (K. D. Martin et al., 2017). Consumers are more cautious in making transactions and sharing information if they feel their data security is at risk (Bélanger & Crossler, 2011). In this diagram, privacy concerns impact the consumer decision-making process, particularly regarding trust in certain platforms or brands (Barth & de Jong, 2017). Data protection and transparency policies are key factors determining consumer trust in a product or service (Bansal et al., 2015). Furthermore, privacy concerns are closely related to the role of social media, where many consumers worry about how their data is being used by these platforms, especially regarding personalized ads and product recommendations ((Taddicken, 2014).

This entire diagram illustrates the synergistic relationship between the three main themes. Social media and privacy concerns influence the consumer decision-making process, but at the same time, consumer interactions with social media and their views on privacy also shape their decisions. This creates a continuous cycle in which these factors influence each other within the context of digital consumer behavior. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, especially for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) like the *Karawo* craftsmen in Gorontalo, who are striving to adapt to changing consumer behavior in the era of digitalization (Parker et al., 2019) (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013); (Hair et al., 2010) By understanding how these three factors interact, SMEs can develop more appropriate strategies for marketing their products and maintaining consumer trust amid ongoing digital transformation (Dwivedi et al., 2019).

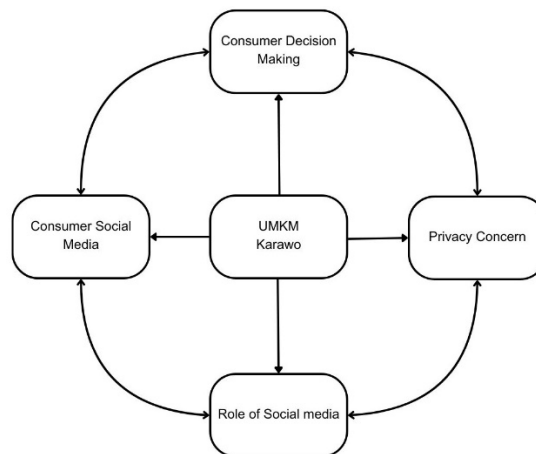


Figure 2: Interaction between digital technology and marketing strategies that must be adopted by *Karawo* SMEs

Karawo SMEs are positioned at the center of the diagram, with arrows connecting them to each variable, indicating how each variable influences their operations and business strategies. The Consumer Decision-Making Process relates to how consumers choose *Karawo* craft products based on online information. The Role of Social Media illustrates how *Karawo* SMEs leverage platforms like Instagram or Facebook to promote their products and engage with consumers. Privacy Concerns highlight the importance of safeguarding consumer data during online transactions, which impacts

consumer trust and loyalty towards *Karawo* products (Ki et al., 2024); (Torabi & Bélanger, 2022); (Corbitt et al., 2003)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The review above highlights that the evolution of consumer behavior in the digital era is heavily influenced by technological transformation. Consumer behavior has significantly changed, particularly in how they access information, make purchasing decisions, and interact with brands. Digitalization enables consumers to become more informed and globally connected. Consumers no longer rely solely on limited information from traditional advertisements or personal recommendations but use various digital information sources such as product reviews, social media, and price comparison websites. This has created a new behavior pattern that is more critical, interactive, and data-driven.

4.1 The evolution of consumer behavior in the digital era

Consumer behavior has significantly evolved in the digital era, driven by technological advancements providing more comprehensive information access. Consumers can now easily access various sources of information, such as product reviews, customer testimonials, and price comparisons online (Chakraborty & Bhat, 2018). This access gives consumers greater control in the decision-making process, allowing them to rely on information from sellers and fellow users (Chandna & Salimath, 2018). Online reviews and testimonials have become important guides in determining purchasing decisions (Park & Nicolau, 2015).

However, with the expansion of available information, the decision-making process has also become more complex. Consumers are not only considering the price and quality of products but also reviewing other factors such as brand reputation on social media, user experiences, and online reviews (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004). This indicates an increased consumer awareness of various aspects of a product before making a purchase, meaning that the product selection process now involves deeper consideration.

Additionally, the influence of social media has become increasingly influential in shaping consumer behavior. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook have become major spaces for consumers to interact with brands and share experiences. Consumers are heavily influenced by the opinions of friends, family, and influencers they follow on social media. Social media also serves as a channel for sharing personal experiences, both positive and negative, which can quickly influence other consumers' perceptions of a particular product or (Laroche & Richard, 2014) ; (De Veirman et al., 2017)

Amid the rise of digital transactions, privacy and data security concerns have also emerged. Consumers are becoming more aware of the risks of data breaches that frequently occur in large companies. These cases foster a skeptical attitude toward how companies handle personal data. As a result, trust in a brand has become increasingly important in the purchasing process. Consumers tend to choose brands that can guarantee the security and privacy of their data, requiring brands to build a good reputation to win consumer loyalty in this digital (K. D. Martin et al., 2017) (Gefen et al., 2003); (Hoffman et al., 1999), the evolution of consumer behavior in the digital era reflects major changes in how they seek information, make decisions, and interact with brands, with privacy and trust becoming key components of the modern consumption ecosystem (Nunan & Di Domenico, 2019)

4.2 Strategy for *Karawo* SMEs

Karawo SMEs in Gorontalo occupy an important strategic position, primarily because *Karawo* embroidery is a part of the local cultural heritage with significant potential to grow, both nationally and internationally. As a traditional craft, *Karawo* reflects Gorontalo's rich culture, which can attract consumers seeking authentic products. However, *Karawo* SMEs face challenges in adopting technology and competing in the rapidly evolving digital marketplace. Limited access to technology and an understanding of digital consumer behavior are key obstacles that must be overcome for these SMEs to thrive.

With the rapid advancement of digitalization, *Karawo* SMEs have great opportunities to leverage technology to expand their market reach. Digitalization can effectively increase product visibility,

attract new customers, and build a stronger brand (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). However, to succeed in this adaptation, *Karawo* SMEs must overcome several barriers, such as access to adequate technology, digital skills, and a deeper understanding of consumer preferences in the digital era. Mastery of these elements is crucial for competing in the modern marketplace.

One of the key strategies that *Karawo* SMEs can apply is digital transformation in marketing. By utilizing e-commerce platforms and social media, SMEs can reach consumers beyond Gorontalo and engage with them more directly. Presence on e-commerce platforms like Tokopedia, Shopee, or niche marketplaces will open opportunities to expand market share. Additionally, social media can be used to strengthen brand identity, where visual content such as photos and videos showcasing the intricate and culturally valuable process of making *Karawo* can capture the attention of digital consumers who are increasingly drawn to high-quality, authentic products (Healy & McDonagh, 2013).

Regarding promotion, using social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok can help *Karawo* SMEs build stronger consumer relationships. Content focusing on storytelling, such as narratives about the history, cultural values, and traditional process of *Karawo* making, can appeal emotionally to modern consumers who value culture and authenticity (Woodside, 2016). When well-packaged, this storytelling can create a deeper bond between consumers and the product, establishing *Karawo* SMEs as producers of high-value craftsmanship.

Collaborating with local and national influencers is also a strategic step that can enhance the visibility of *Karawo* products. Influencers interested in cultural products or handmade crafts can help spread information and expand audience reach (Hughes et al., 2019); (De Veirman et al., 2017). This way, *Karawo* SMEs can introduce their products to a broader market and enhance their competitiveness.

Moreover, consumer data privacy and security have become critical in this digital era (K. D. Martin et al., 2017). *Karawo* SMEs must ensure that their online payment systems are secure and that customer data is well protected (Wilkinson, 2018). Consumer trust in the security of transactions is key to maintaining loyalty and preventing data breaches that could damage the reputation of SMEs (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004).. Investing in technology that ensures encryption and transaction security, as well as transparency in the use of consumer data, is a crucial step that *Karawo* SMEs must take.

To face competition in the digital market, *Karawo* SMEs also need to improve their digital skills. Training in digital marketing, social media management, and e-commerce management is necessary for SMEs to understand market trends and ever-changing consumer behavior (N. Bolton et al., 2014). Additionally, utilizing analytics from digital platforms can help SMEs understand consumer preferences, allowing them to optimize their marketing strategies more effectively.

Overall, *Karawo* SMEs possess significant growth potential through the utilization of digital technology. Achieving success necessitates a complete and focused plan, encompassing digital transformation in marketing, brand enhancement through cultural storytelling, the improvement of digital skills, and the assurance of data protection. By employing an effective strategy, *Karawo* SMEs can compete in the modern market and broaden their scope, both domestically and globally.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Karawo SMEs must swiftly undergo digital transformation in their marketing efforts to reach a broader market, both nationally and internationally. One of the key steps they can take is leveraging e-commerce platforms such as Tokopedia and Shopee, which provide direct access to millions of users across Indonesia. By marketing *Karawo* products on these platforms, SMEs can sell them without geographical limitations, expand their market share, and significantly boost sales. In addition, social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok should be optimally utilized to promote their products. Through visual content such as images and videos, *Karawo* SMEs can showcase the beauty and uniqueness of the *Karawo*-making process, attracting consumers drawn to handcrafted products with high cultural value.

Strengthening the *Karawo* brand can be achieved through storytelling, which involves building a strong narrative about the cultural values and traditional processes behind the making of *Karawo*. By presenting stories about how local craftsmen manually craft each *Karawo* product, SMEs can

reinforce the emotional connection between consumers and the product. Content highlighting the history, traditions, and craftsmanship involved in *Karawo*-making can be published on social media, creating a unique appeal for modern consumers seeking authentic products with deep cultural meaning.

Collaborating with influencers is another crucial strategy to increase the visibility of *Karawo* products in broader markets. Local and national influencers interested in cultural or handmade products can help introduce *Karawo* to a broader audience. Through influencer promotions, *Karawo* SMEs can effectively build brand awareness, reaching consumers who may not have been previously familiar with the product and creating higher demand.

Data security and privacy are also critical concerns in the digital era. *Karawo* SMEs must invest in technologies that ensure consumer data security during online transactions. This includes using encryption in payment processes and transparent privacy policies, making consumers feel secure when sharing their personal information. By ensuring data security, SMEs can build greater trust, ultimately increasing customer loyalty toward the *Karawo* brand.

Furthermore, digital training for *Karawo* SME entrepreneurs is essential to enhance their ability to compete in the modern market. This training can cover online marketing, social media management, and data analytics. By utilizing data analytics, SMEs can better understand consumer behavior and preferences, enabling them to develop more effective and targeted marketing strategies. With sufficient digital skills, *Karawo* SMEs will be better equipped to keep up with market developments, capitalize on available opportunities, and continue to grow in the digital era.

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