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Constructing Consumer Protection Communication to Foster Consumer Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

Consumer protection communication has evolved from merely disseminating information into a strategic communication approach aimed at strengthening consumer sovereignty in the digital era. Using interpretative narrative review based on an extensive literature review. The findings demonstrate that consumer protection communication is no longer limited to resolving consumer complaints but functions as a multidimensional strategy for building trust, transparency, accountability, and collaboration among stakeholders. Digital transformation has fundamentally shifted consumers from passive recipients of protection into active participants who act as co-creators, prosumers, and market watchdogs through digital literacy, participation, and technological engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer protection communication has become increasingly important in the context of rapid digital transformation and the growing reliance on public services. Since 2010, the author has been a regular user of Jakarta's public transportation system, including the KAI Commuter Line, which serves more than 700,000 passengers daily across the Greater Jakarta metropolitan area, and the TransJakarta Bus Rapid Transit network, which accommodates approximately 1.4 million daily passengers. Daily commuting through integrated transport facilities has provided long-term firsthand experience of the evolution of Indonesia's public transportation ecosystem, ranging from infrastructure development to digital service integration. These experiences have shaped not only practical understanding but also critical reflections on consumer behavior, communication, and service quality.

The decision to use public transportation has been influenced by multiple factors beyond economic considerations, including environmental awareness, accessibility, and the pursuit of sustainable mobility. As a consumer, however, transportation services are evaluated not only through physical infrastructure and operational performance but also through the effectiveness of communication. From printed announcements and static information boards to integrated mobile applications and social media platforms, communication has become an indispensable component of consumer experience in public transportation. This transformation highlights that effective communication is essential for facilitating informed decision-making, reducing uncertainty, and strengthening public trust.

Beyond transportation, the author also regularly engages with retail services and digital banking applications, reflecting the increasingly interconnected nature of contemporary consumer experiences. As both a media practitioner and a communication scholar, these experiences reveal that consumer protection extends beyond legal safeguards and product quality to include strategic communication that empowers consumers throughout their interactions with service providers. Although Indonesia's Consumer Protection Act (Law No. 8 of 1999) provides the legal foundation for protecting consumer rights, communication remains the primary mechanism through which those rights are understood, exercised, and defended.

These observations raise a fundamental question: can consumers truly be considered sovereign in the digital era? The traditional concept of consumer sovereignty has been challenged by platform-mediated digital markets, where consumers increasingly function as co-creators (Skålén et al., 2015), prosumers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), and redistributors or resellers (Ertz et al., 2019). Furthermore, participatory digital economies are increasingly shaped by platform visibility, datafication, algorithmic pricing, and artificial intelligence, which collectively influence consumer behavior and decision-making (Zuboff, 2019). Consequently, consumer sovereignty should no longer be understood merely as freedom of choice but as the capacity of consumers to maintain autonomy within digitally mediated market systems (Shahria & Wulff, 2026). Recent studies suggest that preserving consumer sovereignty requires stronger business ethics and greater corporate recognition of consumers in terms of visibility, status, affective engagement, and capacity building (Bhatnagar et al., 2023).

Based on this background, this study investigates the construction of consumer protection communication as a strategic framework for strengthening consumer sovereignty in the digital era. Specifically, it addresses the following research question: How can consumer protection communication be conceptualized and developed from the complementary perspectives of consumers, businesses, and government to promote consumer sovereignty within digital market ecosystems?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the theoretical foundations and contemporary scholarship underpinning this study, with particular emphasis on consumer sovereignty, digital consumers, and consumer protection communication. These concepts provide the analytical framework for examining the research problem and developing recommendations for strengthening consumer protection communication in the digital era.

Consumer Sovereignty

Consumer sovereignty represents one of the fundamental objectives of consumer protection. It is achieved when consumers are able to make independent purchasing decisions, freely choose products and services, and receive quality consistent with their expectations. The realization of consumer sovereignty ultimately contributes to public welfare and individual well-being.

Conceptually, the classical notion of consumer sovereignty emphasizes individuals' freedom to choose according to their preferences without imposing costs on others (Lerner, 1972). This perspective has traditionally been associated with democratic market systems that promote competition and economic efficiency. In contrast, Scitovsky (1962) argued that consumer sovereignty is not determined solely by individual preferences but is also shaped by market structures and public interests.

Subsequent scholarship has expanded the concept beyond purchasing autonomy toward personal responsibility, creative well-being, fulfillment rather than acquisition, and purchasing power guided by sustainability, equality, democracy, and individual happiness (Sassatelli, 2015). From an economic perspective, consumer sovereignty has also been interpreted through rational choice assumptions embedded within market systems (Redmond, 2010).

The emergence of the digital economy has fundamentally transformed the meaning of consumer sovereignty. Political and economic tensions increasingly surround the concept because it intersects with issues of consumer autonomy, equality, and corporate dominance (Henry, 2010). Moreover, digital platforms have introduced new challenges that reshape consumers' ability to exercise independent decision-making (Chirat, 2024).

Platformization further complicates consumer sovereignty through algorithmic governance and metric-based systems (Caliandro et al., 2024). Content creators and hashtag-driven communication continuously reproduce narratives that influence consumer perceptions (Schöps et al., 2022). Likewise, engagement metrics, datafication, and monetization strategies (Airoldi & Rokka, 2020), reinforced by digital rating and reputation systems (Kozinets et al., 2021), increasingly shape consumer choices and market visibility.

Furthermore, platform-controlled content curation and circulation have diminished consumers' influence over value creation and market participation (Duffy et al., 2019). Preserving consumer sovereignty within platform-mediated markets therefore requires accountability (Tiensuu et al., 2026), sustainability (Blaz et al., 2026), the maintenance of meaningful physical touchpoints (Egan-Wyer, 2026), attractive consumer experiences (Thomas et al., 2026), social influence mechanisms (Fares et al., 2026), and, above all, calibrated communication capable of balancing corporate and consumer interests (Prakash & Thakur, 2026).

Overall, consumer sovereignty continues to evolve alongside technological development and changing societal expectations. Nevertheless, it remains a strategic priority for businesses seeking to deliver superior customer value and service quality, while governments continue to regard consumer sovereignty as an essential mechanism for strengthening public trust and promoting economic welfare.

Digital Consumers

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped consumer behavior by shifting purchasing activities from physical marketplaces to digitally mediated environments. Everyday transactions that once required visiting traditional markets or retail stores are now conducted through smartphones and digital applications. Consequently, algorithms and personalized services have become central mechanisms influencing consumer experiences in the digital marketplace.

Digital technologies have significantly transformed business operations by influencing how consumers search for information, establish relationships, and make purchasing decisions (Güngör & Çadırcı, 2022). Accordingly, digitalization has altered patterns of consumer interaction, collaboration, trust, and satisfaction, requiring organizations to continuously adapt their business strategies (Güngör & Çadırcı, 2022; Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023).

Digital consumers increasingly demand stronger privacy protection while simultaneously expecting personalized services that foster closer relationships with firms (Schweide et al., 2022). Social networking platforms and electronic commerce have intensified interactions between corporations and consumers, creating new opportunities to satisfy consumer needs and enhance customer experiences (Aguayo-Villodas et al., 2024). Moreover, consumers increasingly express their identities through ownership, purchasing behavior, and social media participation (Rogova & Matta, 2023).

Despite these opportunities, digital consumption also introduces substantial risks. Excessive reliance on digital technologies threatens personal privacy (Richards, 2013), shifts lived experiences toward virtual environments (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022), weakens ethical identity and human autonomy (Zuboff, 2022; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019), contributes to addictive behavior

(Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021), impairs decision-making processes (Duan et al., 2019), and increases behavioral disorders (Robbins & Clark, 2015).

Kanungo et al. (2022) conceptualize digital consumption as a contemporary socio-psychological and techno-ethical phenomenon characterized by five core dimensions of digital harm: (1) socio-psychological deprivation, (2) augmented reality, (3) unethical behavior and erosion of trust, (4) compulsive behavior, and (5) differentiated distance.

Digitalization also enables consumers to influence one another through opinions and user-generated content distributed across social media platforms (Kim et al., 2016; Palka et al., 2009). Consequently, firms are increasingly challenged to deliver integrated customer experiences across interconnected digital ecosystems while continuously adapting to evolving consumer expectations (Kalaignanam et al., 2021).

Taken together, digitalization has fundamentally transformed both consumer behavior and business operations by reshaping how individuals access information, interact with firms, and make purchasing decisions. These changes require organizations to embrace technology-driven processes, data-driven decision-making, and customer-centric strategies capable of delivering personalized and meaningful customer experiences.

At the same time, digital consumers have become increasingly empowered through social media, e-commerce, and artificial intelligence while simultaneously demanding stronger privacy protection, greater trust, and closer relationships with organizations. Nevertheless, digital transformation also introduces significant challenges, including threats to privacy, erosion of ethical values, digital addiction, impaired decision-making, and broader socio-psychological consequences that may reduce individual well-being. Therefore, organizations must balance digital innovation with ethical governance, robust data protection, and organizational adaptability to create sustainable value for consumers and other stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interpretive narrative review as its primary research methodology (Ortiz-Riomalo et al., 2023; Dixon-Woods et al., 2005; Kastner et al., 2012). An interpretive narrative review integrates, synthesizes, and critically interprets existing knowledge using a common conceptual framework to generate new theoretical insights (Ortiz-Riomalo et al., 2023). Rather than merely summarizing previous studies, this approach emphasizes critical synthesis, thematic interpretation, and conceptual integration to identify emerging patterns and produce novel perspectives (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). Furthermore, extracted evidence is organized into thematic clusters that facilitate the development of higher-level conceptual insights (Kastner et al., 2012).

The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, SAGE, Elsevier, Scopus, and ScienceDirect, with the inclusion criterion limited to peer-reviewed studies published in English. The search strategy combined relevant keywords using the Boolean operator "AND", including consumer AND protection, consumer AND communication, consumer AND sovereignty, consumer AND digital, and digital AND communication.

A total of 69 scholarly articles were selected for detailed analysis. The review intentionally did not adopt the PRISMA protocol because its primary objective was not to conduct a systematic review or meta-analysis but to develop an interpretive narrative that emphasizes critical analysis, conceptual synthesis, and theory development.

Drawing upon the researcher's scientific expertise, the selected literature primarily consisted of influential review articles and highly cited studies that provided comprehensive conceptual insights. The literature was analyzed to identify recurring thematic patterns, cluster conceptual relationships, and synthesize scholarly recommendations until theoretical saturation was achieved.

RESEARCH RESULT

Consumer protection communication is an extension of corporate communication and marketing communication from the perspective of business actors. From the government's perspective, it is rooted in public communication, whereas for consumers, consumer protection communication represents an effort to cultivate self-awareness and encourage individuals to remain vigilant and communicative throughout transactional processes, both in offline and online environments.

The Concept and Practice of Consumer Protection Communication

From the perspective of communication theory, the central concept underlying consumer protection communication is relationship. Such relationships operate across interpersonal, group, community, public, and digital contexts, reflecting the inherently relational nature of consumer interactions with other individuals and institutions. Consequently, the effectiveness of consumer protection communication should be assessed according to its contribution to consumer sovereignty. When communication enables consumers to exercise informed, autonomous, and protected decision-making, it can be considered successful. Conversely, the absence of consumer sovereignty indicates shortcomings in the communication process.

Within the framework of consumer sovereignty, the primary objective of consumer protection communication is to ensure that no party becomes a victim of unfair or harmful market practices (Lerner, 1972). This consumer-centered orientation positions consumers as the principal stakeholders whose interests deserve priority rather than neglect. Consumer protection communication is fundamentally directed toward individuals rather than the general public (Scitovsky, 1962). Nevertheless, when similar consumer experiences are shared by large numbers of people, individual concerns may evolve into collective awareness and collective action. Despite this transformation, the foundation of consumer protection communication remains rooted in personal communication and individual consumer experiences.

Although personal agency constitutes its primary focus, consumer protection communication simultaneously promotes the principles of sustainability, equality, and democracy (Sassatelli, 2015). These principles demonstrate that communication extends beyond facilitating market exchanges or creating economic value. Instead, it establishes relationships that empower consumers and enable the realization of genuine consumer sovereignty.

Sustainability constitutes a fundamental pillar of consumer protection communication because it emphasizes environmental and social responsibility through transparent, educational, and honest information dissemination. In this context, sustainability extends beyond environmental protection by fostering collective awareness that consumer rights should be actively defended and promoted. When these objectives are achieved, consumer protection communication contributes to the realization of sustainable consumer pleasure, which Sassatelli (2015) defines as "an interactive learning process of mutual shaping between social beings, socially mediated objects and market networks."

The principle of equality in consumer protection communication ensures that all stakeholders are granted equal rights regardless of their social backgrounds or circumstances. This principle also promotes inclusivity by safeguarding vulnerable consumers, including children, older adults, and women. Equal access to accurate and reliable information minimizes discrimination against marginalized or disadvantaged groups while enhancing their capacity to participate in the marketplace. Consequently, equality not only reduces social inequalities but also strengthens consumers' strategic position within market systems (Sassatelli, 2015).

The broader aspiration of consumer protection communication is to foster a democratic society in which every individual has the opportunity to express opinions, provide feedback, and submit complaints regarding products or services as an essential form of public participation. Because consumer protection communication is fundamentally dialogical, it encourages continuous feedback while reinforcing transparency and accountability. Through these processes, consumer protection becomes a practice that can be demonstrated, performed, and socially recognized.

Overall, consumer protection communication can be understood as a relational communication process aimed at achieving consumer sovereignty through interpersonal, group, public, and digital interactions. Rather than serving merely as a mechanism for information dissemination, consumer protection communication functions as an instrument of consumer empowerment by strengthening consumers' strategic position, advancing justice and equity, and fostering a more participatory society committed to protecting consumer rights.

Dilemmas and Challenges of Consumer Protection Communication

Consumer protection communication is no longer confined to traditional marketplaces where consumers purchase vegetables, meat, or other daily necessities. In the digital economy, consumer protection communication has increasingly shifted toward platform-based environments. Consequently, the primary dilemma and challenge of consumer protection communication lies in confronting corporate power (Henry, 2010; Chirat, 2024), particularly large technology companies operating within platform-mediated digital markets (Shahria & Wulff, 2026).

As digital platforms continue to evolve, these challenges have become increasingly complex. They encompass algorithmic governance and platform metrics (Caliandro et al., 2024), repetitive and amplified narratives (Schöps et al., 2022), engagement optimization, datafication, and monetisation (Airoldi & Rokka, 2020), as well as rating and reputation systems (Kozinets et al., 2021), platform-controlled curation and content circulation (Duffy et al., 2019), and artificial intelligence systems that prioritize speed, automation, and extensive reach (Zuboff, 2019).

These developments represent inevitable consequences of technological advancement that consumers cannot simply avoid. Nevertheless, the dilemmas and challenges associated with digital consumer protection can be addressed by consumers, civil society, businesses, and governments through distinct yet complementary approaches.

Consumers can respond by strengthening their digital literacy, continuously adapting to technological developments, and avoiding manipulative digital practices. Civil society can undertake advocacy initiatives at both local and national levels to raise public awareness and encourage collective vigilance in navigating digital environments. Governments can establish regulatory frameworks and policy initiatives designed to protect consumers from manipulative practices in the digital economy. Meanwhile, businesses and industries should refrain from exploiting manipulative technological practices by promoting greater transparency, accountability, and fairness in their interactions with consumers.

Despite these challenges, digital consumer protection communication also creates new opportunities. Consumers are no longer merely recipients of commercial messages but increasingly become content creators. This transformation reflects the evolving digital economy, in which consumers are recognized as co-creators (Skålén et al., 2015), prosumers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), and eventually redistributors or resellers (Ertz et al., 2019).

From the perspective of consumer protection communication, the emergence of consumers as co-creators can be interpreted both as a form of empowerment and as a potential source of new vulnerabilities. Numerous brands now actively encourage consumers to participate in product development, marketing activities, and innovation processes. Such collaborative practices strengthen consumer-brand relationships, foster long-term loyalty, and cultivate a stronger sense of ownership among consumers.

The transformation of consumers into prosumers represents an effort by brands to develop more resilient and adaptive business models. Consumer engagement therefore extends beyond superficial interactions such as likes and follows on social media, evolving instead into the archetypal sharing economy in which the traditional boundaries separating producers and consumers become increasingly blurred. As a consequence of digital transformation driven by the internet and social media, prosumers actively contribute to the creation of new economic and social value.

Ultimately, the evolution from co-creator to prosumer enables consumers to assume the roles of resellers and redistributors. Such active collaboration generates mutual value creation within the gig economy by emphasizing operational efficiency alongside meaningful public engagement. This transformation is driven by producers' growing need to establish consumer trust while simultaneously strengthening brand legitimacy and reputation within society.

Nevertheless, consumer protection communication in the digital era must be grounded in accountability (Tiensuu et al., 2026), sustainability (Blaz et al., 2026), and calibrated communication (Prakash & Thakur, 2026). It also requires stronger enforcement of business ethics and greater corporate commitment to enhancing consumers' visibility, status, affective well-being, and capabilities (Bhatnagar et al., 2023). Achieving these objectives ultimately depends upon government policies that prioritize consumer interests while simultaneously fostering a regulatory environment that remains conducive to corporate investment and sustainable digital innovation.

Elements of Consumer Protection Communication

The primary objective of consumer protection communication is to position consumers not as passive objects of market transactions but as active subjects with sovereignty and agency. In the context of digitalization, consumers' roles have undergone profound transformation as they are increasingly influenced by multiple dimensions of consumer protection communication. Within the digital ecosystem, consumers occupy a dual position: they are simultaneously empowered by technological advancements while remaining vulnerable to emerging digital risks.

The first element is the dynamics of digital culture. Consumer protection communication, particularly in relation to digital consumers, reflects the dynamic interaction between digital culture and digital acculturation, both of which influence consumer empowerment (Dey et al., 2020). This transformation is evident as consumers increasingly adopt digital technologies in their everyday lives through social media platforms, chatbots, and artificial intelligence applications (Gregory et al., 2018; Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023).

Digitalization has therefore become the fundamental element of consumer protection communication because contemporary consumers are deeply embedded within digital environments. This condition represents an inevitable consequence of technological progress, which promises greater convenience and efficiency in market transactions while simultaneously becoming an integral component of everyday life. Accordingly, consumer protection communication must recognize the cultural dynamics associated with digital transformation by providing opportunities that enable consumers to continuously learn, adapt, and strengthen their digital competencies.

The second element concerns empowerment and endowment. Granados and Gupta (2013) characterize digital consumers as a new generation distinguished by their levels of empowerment and endowment. Digitalization has the potential to generate substantial benefits, yet it may also produce significant harm when technological innovation is exploited irresponsibly by industries or inadequately understood by consumers. Consequently, consumer empowerment becomes the central objective of consumer protection communication. By fostering critical awareness, consumer protection communication enables individuals to become informed, empowered, and sovereign participants in digital markets.

The third element is integration. Batra and Keller (2016) argue that communication patterns have fundamentally evolved due to the emergence of new media, shifting media consumption patterns, divided consumer attention, and the growing need for the optimal integration of marketing communications. Within this context, consumer protection communication should function as an integrative rather than divisive mechanism by encouraging collaboration among consumers, businesses, governments, and other relevant stakeholders.

Overall, consumer protection communication in the digital era extends far beyond its traditional role as a channel for information dissemination and consumer education. Instead, it has evolved into a strategic instrument for strengthening consumer sovereignty. Digitalization has transformed consumers into actors occupying a dual position: on one hand, they are increasingly empowered through broader access to information, digital technologies, and online platforms; on the other hand, they are increasingly exposed to risks such as information manipulation, personal data exploitation, and disparities in digital literacy.

Therefore, consumer protection communication should prioritize the development of critical awareness that enables consumers to make informed, independent, and responsible decisions. Its effectiveness should not be measured solely by the dissemination of information but also by its capacity to transform consumers from passive market objects into sovereign, adaptive, and resilient actors capable of navigating the complexities of the digital economy.

Orientation of Consumer Protection Communication

Consumer protection communication can be understood from three interrelated perspectives: corporations as business actors, consumers as the primary beneficiaries of consumer protection, and governments as regulatory authorities responsible for formulating and implementing consumer protection policies (Donoghue & De Klerk, 2009; Benartzi & Thaler, 1999; Foxall & Pallister, 1998; Martenson, 2005; Cope et al., 2010). This multidimensional perspective demonstrates that consumer protection communication constitutes a broad field of study involving multiple stakeholders whose roles are mutually interconnected. Furthermore, consumer protection communication represents an essential component of strategic communication and brand management (Tsai, 2005; Dubois et al., 2011; Kronrod, 2016).

From the corporate perspective, consumers serve as the central reference point in marketing management and brand development. Contemporary branding strategies increasingly emphasize consumer experiences by integrating sensory, emotional, social, and intellectual dimensions to create meaningful and positive relationships with customers (Tsai, 2005). Effective communication with consumers also requires corporations to establish trust by addressing consumer beliefs, attitudes, and opinions through the provision of accurate, reliable, and transparent information (Dubois et al., 2011). Consequently, consumer protection becomes an integral element of strategic communication by strengthening customer experience, enhancing consumer trust, and integrating marketing communication strategies that are responsive to the evolving digital media environment.

From the consumer perspective, society remains the principal focus of consumer protection initiatives. In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, consumer protection has shifted beyond conventional regulatory approaches toward governance frameworks that accommodate rapid technological innovation in products and services (Howells, 2019). Protecting consumers therefore requires not only comprehensive legal frameworks (Brownsword, 2017) but also more specific and adaptive regulatory policies (Twigg-Flesner, 2018). As digital transformation accelerates, consumer protection must increasingly address issues such as data security, responsible technological innovation, and the mitigation of risks associated with generative artificial intelligence.

From the governmental perspective, consumer protection requires balancing two equally important objectives: safeguarding citizens' rights while maintaining economic sustainability and encouraging investment. Governments are therefore responsible for formulating effective consumer protection policies, promoting consumer awareness through education (Wang et al., 2022), and developing institutional systems capable of strengthening consumer trust (Macready et al., 2025). Beyond regulatory enforcement, governments play a central role in enhancing consumer literacy, reinforcing institutional accountability, and fostering an ecosystem that simultaneously protects consumers and supports sustainable economic growth.

Overall, consumer protection communication represents a multidimensional approach that requires synergy among corporations, consumers, and governments to establish a marketplace that is safe, equitable, transparent, and sustainable. The rapid evolution of digital technologies demands that all stakeholders adopt consumer protection strategies that are adaptive, collaborative, and innovation-oriented to effectively address emerging challenges in the digital era. Consequently, the effectiveness of consumer protection communication ultimately depends on the harmonious collaboration among corporations, consumers, and governments in promoting a consumer protection ecosystem founded upon trust, transparency, security, and sustainability.

DISCUSSION

The discussion focuses on advancing a conceptual orientation for consumer protection communication through three interrelated perspectives: consumers, corporations (or business actors), and governments. This framework demonstrates that consumer protection communication extends beyond theoretical discourse to become an applied and strategic approach emphasizing empowerment and the strengthening of each stakeholder's role within the marketplace.

Advancing Corporate-Oriented Consumer Protection Communication

Within the context of consumer protection communication, corporations encompass business actors of all sizes, ranging from small and medium-sized enterprises to large multinational corporations and conglomerates. Communication practices associated with corporations have traditionally been examined through business communication, organizational communication, corporate communication, public relations, and marketing communication. Consumer protection communication, however, possesses a distinctive orientation because its primary objective is to safeguard and empower consumers as both individuals and members of society. Consequently, the development of corporate-oriented consumer protection communication should consistently position consumers as its central stakeholders.

First, corporations should establish responsive complaint-handling mechanisms to strengthen consumer loyalty. Effective complaint management constitutes a fundamental component of consumer protection communication and should be implemented across all levels of business operations. Organizations should adopt persuasive rather than argumentative communication strategies when responding to consumer complaints. Timely and empathetic responses improve the effectiveness and efficiency of consumer protection communication while strengthening long-term consumer relationships.

Producers frequently fail to recognize deficiencies in product performance because many dissatisfied consumers choose not to communicate their complaints directly to the company (Donoghue & De Klerk, 2009). Consequently, organizations must develop a comprehensive understanding of consumer complaint behavior, including the reasons consumers decide to complain, as well as the cognitive and emotional processes underlying such behavior. Without this understanding, firms are unlikely to recognize the close relationship between effective complaint handling, customer loyalty, and long-term profitability (Donoghue & De Klerk, 2009).

Addressing consumer dissatisfaction through consumer protection communication therefore requires organizations to prioritize active listening over defensive argumentation. Rather than focusing on refuting consumer claims, businesses should seek to understand consumer expectations and collaboratively identify mutually beneficial solutions before conflicts escalate.

Second, corporations should cultivate communication certainty. Achieving certainty in consumer communication requires organizations to provide complete, accurate, and transparent information while developing effective rumor management and word-of-mouth communication strategies (Dubois et al., 2011). Communication should minimize ambiguity, misinterpretation, and information bias by ensuring contextual relevance and message precision. Such certainty strengthens consumer trust and reduces informational uncertainty throughout the consumer journey.

As digitalization continues to transform consumer behavior, consumer protection communication should also support consumer decision-making by developing a deeper understanding of the consumer decision journey and the ways consumers process communication through both bottom-up communication matching and top-down communication optimization models (Batra & Keller, 2016). Consumer experiences throughout their interactions with firms create lasting impressions that significantly influence future attitudes toward brands and purchasing behavior.

Third, corporations must continuously adapt to technological change. Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed business operations by influencing how consumers access information, establish relationships, and make purchasing decisions (Güngör & Çadırcı, 2022). Continuous adaptation has therefore become an essential principle of consumer protection communication. Digital transformation requires organizations to respond to evolving patterns of consumer interaction, collaboration, trust, and satisfaction (Güngör & Çadırcı, 2022; Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023).

Fourth, organizations should continuously create new consumer value. Digital transformation requires firms to adopt technology-driven processes and data-driven decision-making when designing products, delivering services, and managing consumer relationships (Wessel et al., 2021). This transformation encourages companies to redesign products, services, and organizational processes to generate new forms of customer value (Nylén & Holmström, 2019), thereby reshaping consumers' roles and everyday experiences (Gregory et al., 2018). Within increasingly interconnected digital ecosystems, corporations are challenged to deliver seamless customer experiences across multiple digital platforms (Kalaignanam et al., 2021). Such experiences become the foundation upon which consumers evaluate brands and establish long-term relationships with firms.

Fifth, organizations must prioritize data protection. Protecting consumer data has become a critical corporate responsibility because public trust increasingly depends on responsible data governance. Data protection therefore represents a central component of consumer protection communication (Osman, 2025). Furthermore, businesses should mitigate the potential risks associated with generative artificial intelligence by providing clear governance frameworks and practical guidance for consumers (Eilert & Robinson, 2025). Strengthening consumers' sense of control and belonging further enhances trust and long-term engagement (Xu et al., 2025).

Sixth, corporations should continuously develop consumer-friendly business models. Contemporary digital transformation has accelerated the shift toward customer-centricity, requiring organizations to redesign their business models around consumer needs and experiences (Hanelt et al., 2021). Once consumers become the central focus of organizational strategy, business activities across the entire value chain—from product development to after-sales services—must consistently prioritize customer interests.

Seventh, consumer protection communication should adopt a public communication orientation. Businesses ultimately serve society, and therefore their communication strategies should reflect broader public interests. According to Nikolaevich and Nikolaevich (2019), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identifies several core principles of public communication that are directly relevant to consumer protection: (1) participation through freedom of association, expression, and constructive dialogue; (2) the rule of law, characterized by fairness, impartiality, and respect for human and consumer rights; (3) transparency that supports freedom of information; (4) accessibility and completeness of information for all consumers; (5) responsiveness to citizens' needs; (6) consensus orientation that balances diverse interests; (7) equity by ensuring equal opportunities to improve well-being; and (8) efficiency and effectiveness in utilizing resources to meet public needs.

Eighth, corporations should institutionalize good business practices. The United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (2016) establish internationally recognized principles for responsible commercial practices in both online and offline markets. These principles include: (a) fair and equitable treatment of consumers throughout all stages of the business relationship; (b) ethical commercial conduct that avoids illegal, deceptive, discriminatory, or abusive practices; (c) comprehensive disclosure and transparency regarding products, services, contractual terms, fees, and pricing to facilitate informed consumer decisions; (d) consumer education and awareness programs that enhance consumers' knowledge, financial literacy, and decision-making capabilities; (e) protection of consumer privacy through appropriate mechanisms for data governance, security, transparency, and informed consent; and (f) accessible, transparent, affordable, fair, and effective complaint-handling and dispute-resolution mechanisms that minimize unnecessary costs and burdens for consumers.

Overall, consumer protection communication has evolved from a reactive mechanism for handling complaints into a comprehensive corporate strategy that integrates trust, transparency, digital technologies, data protection, customer experience, and corporate governance. In the digital economy, organizations capable of protecting consumers through transparent, responsive, and public-oriented communication will achieve more sustainable competitive advantages than firms whose strategies remain focused primarily on sales and promotional activities.

Advancing Individual- and Community-Based Consumer Protection Communication

Consumers constitute the central focus of consumer protection communication. They should not be positioned as passive objects of market activities but as active subjects with agency. They should not merely be perceived as victims but as key actors, nor should they remain followers rather than pioneers in shaping fair and sustainable marketplaces. Although realizing this ideal remains challenging, consumer protection communication provides a strategic framework for strengthening consumer sovereignty through individual and collective empowerment.

The first priority is protecting consumer rights. In many developing and low-income countries, where consumers come from diverse cultural backgrounds and possess varying levels of consumer knowledge and skills, promoting consumer rights and cultivating a consumer-oriented culture remain significant challenges (Donoghue & De Klerk, 2009). Consumer rights should not be defended only after complaints have been submitted to businesses or consumer protection agencies. Instead, they should be proactively protected and continuously safeguarded as fundamental principles of market governance.

Fundamental consumer rights include the right to safety, security, and comfort when using goods and services. Consumers are also entitled to freely choose products and services according to their preferences, purchasing power, and the guarantees promised by providers. From a communication perspective, consumers have the right to receive accurate, honest, and transparent information regarding product quality, conditions, and warranties. They are equally entitled to express complaints and opinions, have those concerns heard and addressed, receive advocacy and consumer education, obtain fair treatment, and receive appropriate compensation when products or services fail to meet agreed standards.

The second priority is empowering consumers to strengthen their bargaining power. Consumer empowerment, whether through information disclosure or consumer education, has been widely recognized as an effective mechanism for addressing the imbalance of bargaining power between consumers and businesses (Mak, 2012). Consumers frequently rely on heuristic decision-making in complex purchasing environments because they seek to reduce perceived risks, often lack sufficient expertise to evaluate complicated information, or demonstrate relatively low involvement in purchasing decisions (Benartzi & Thaler, 1999; Foxall & Pallister, 1998; Martenson, 2005).

Consumer literacy therefore becomes the foundation for strengthening bargaining power. Consumers should develop the habit of conducting independent research before making purchasing decisions, carefully evaluating alternative options, and seeking recommendations based on other consumers' experiences. Such practices reduce information asymmetry and improve the quality of consumer decision-making.

Where negotiation opportunities exist, consumers should actively utilize them to secure more favorable outcomes. Becoming an informed consumer requires maintaining alternative purchasing options, thereby encouraging businesses to recognize consumers' bargaining capacity and respond more competitively.

Beyond individual capability, collective consumer action represents another important source of consumer power. Digital communities and social media platforms have significantly expanded opportunities for collective advocacy, enabling consumers to share experiences, mobilize public opinion, and influence corporate behavior. Such collective engagement strengthens consumer sovereignty while contributing to more equitable and socially sustainable markets.

The third priority is protecting consumers from becoming victims of digital risks. Consumer protection communication seeks to cultivate strong self-awareness based on knowledge, critical thinking, and accumulated experience, particularly within digital environments. Consumers should continuously update their understanding of technological developments, regulatory changes, and emerging social issues because informed decision-making increasingly determines their ability to navigate digital markets safely.

Excessive digital consumption may generate significant digital harms and threaten individual privacy (Richards, 2013). Consequently, digital consumers increasingly demand stronger privacy protections alongside personalized marketing practices that are driven by technologies designed to establish closer relationships between consumers and corporations (Schweidel et al., 2022).

At the same time, digital transformation presents broader ethical challenges. Digital technologies increasingly transfer aspects of human life into virtual environments (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022), potentially limiting human autonomy and ethical identity (Zuboff, 2022), eroding individual autonomy (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019), contributing to addictive behaviors (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021), impairing decision-making processes (Duan et al., 2019), and generating behavioral disorders (Robbins & Clark, 2015). Accordingly, digital consumption has emerged as an important concept within socio-psychological and technology ethics literature to describe the unintended consequences of technological development and unethical digital practices (Kanungo et al., 2022).

Consumers must therefore remain vigilant in protecting their privacy and preserving their digital identities while participating in online activities. Rational judgment, ethical reasoning, and responsible decision-making should remain fundamental principles guiding consumer behavior. Ethical conduct ultimately reinforces consumer sovereignty by enabling individuals to participate confidently and responsibly in digital markets.

The fourth priority is strengthening consumer voice and public opinion. Consumer perspectives represent valuable mechanisms of market accountability. Nevertheless, consumers should exercise their freedom of expression responsibly while avoiding defamatory or misleading statements. Since consumers generally do not enjoy legal immunity when publicly criticizing products or services, ethical communication and respect for all stakeholders remain essential for sustaining consumer credibility and sovereignty.

Digitalization has further enhanced consumers' ability to influence one another through online opinions (Kim et al., 2016) and user-generated content distributed via social media platforms (Palka et al., 2009). Interactions between corporations and consumers have become increasingly intensive because social networking platforms and electronic commerce facilitate continuous engagement and satisfaction of consumer needs (Aguayo-Villodas et al., 2024). Moreover, digital consumers increasingly express their identities through ownership patterns, purchasing behavior, and social media participation (Rogova & Matta, 2023).

Rather than weakening consumer protection communication, digitalization—particularly social media—should strengthen consumer empowerment. Digital technologies enable consumers not only to participate in commercial activities but also to transform themselves into entrepreneurs, distributors, and content creators capable of building business networks that extend beyond local and national boundaries into global markets.

Therefore, consumer protection communication in the digital era should no longer be understood merely as an effort to protect consumers from economic harm. Instead, it should be conceptualized as a strategic process for strengthening consumer sovereignty by transforming consumers from passive recipients of protection into active contributors to the marketplace ecosystem. This transformation is built upon four interconnected pillars: protecting consumer rights, strengthening bargaining power through literacy and collective action, enhancing consumers' capacity to mitigate digital risks, and promoting ethical public participation through responsible consumer voice. So, the future success of consumer protection communication should not be measured solely by declining numbers of complaints or disputes but by increasing consumers' capacity to become critical, ethically responsible, digitally competent, and empowered individuals who actively contribute as strategic partners in creating fair, transparent, and sustainable markets.

Advancing Government-Based Consumer Protection Communication

Governments serve as the primary guardians of consumer protection communication. Their role is particularly strategic because governmental interventions directly influence consumer welfare through legislation, public policy, and the establishment of consumer protection institutions. Through these regulatory mechanisms, governments possess the authority to enforce legal sanctions and impose penalties on businesses that violate consumer protection laws and regulations.

The first priority is the development of policy frameworks that shift from prohibition toward the promotion of responsible business practices. Government intervention in consumer protection increasingly involves technology-driven restructuring to address emerging challenges within digital markets (Zhang, 2025). Such interventions encourage businesses, particularly corporations, to prioritize consumer interests by adopting responsible digital technologies and ethical innovation. More importantly, governments should facilitate a transition from a regulatory approach focused primarily on prohibition toward one that actively promotes responsible corporate behavior (prohibition to promotion) (Petrotta, 2025). This policy orientation strengthens consumer sovereignty by encouraging organizations to internalize consumer protection as a core business value rather than merely a legal obligation.

Effective consumer protection policies should be grounded in rigorous scientific evidence and empirical research. Evidence-based policymaking increases the likelihood that regulatory interventions will generate tangible benefits for consumers. Furthermore, consumer-related policy initiatives should undergo pilot implementation, systematic evaluation, and comprehensive public communication before being adopted on a broader scale.

The second priority is the development of risk-oriented consumer protection communication. Within this framework, government decision-making should adopt a comprehensive risk analysis approach comprising three interrelated components: risk assessment, risk management, and risk communication (Cope et al., 2010).

Risk assessment involves identifying potential hazards while simultaneously evaluating expected health benefits and, where appropriate, broader environmental, economic, social, and ethical implications. Risk management refers to the systematic evaluation of alternative policy options based on evidence generated through risk assessment and other relevant analyses. This process encompasses regulatory decision-making, implementation, monitoring, review, prioritization of policy alternatives, and the selection of the most appropriate regulatory response. Risk communication, meanwhile, should be understood as an interactive process of exchanging information and perspectives among governments, experts, businesses, and consumers throughout the risk analysis process. Rather than relying exclusively on technical risk assessments, effective risk communication should incorporate consumer perceptions, concerns, information needs, and behavioral preferences (Cope et al., 2010). Such an approach enhances transparency, public trust, and the legitimacy of regulatory decisions.

The third priority is aligning national consumer protection policies with international standards established by the United Nations. According to the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (2016), governments should develop, strengthen, and continuously improve comprehensive consumer protection policies while considering internationally recognized principles and relevant international agreements. These guidelines emphasize ensuring consumer access to essential goods and services, protecting vulnerable consumers, safeguarding consumers from hazardous products, mitigating environmental and social risks associated with consumption, promoting and protecting consumers' economic interests, and providing adequate information that enables informed purchasing decisions, including information concerning environmental and social impacts.

The Guidelines further emphasize the importance of consumer education, including education on sustainable consumption and environmental responsibility, as well as protecting consumers' freedom to establish consumer organizations and participate actively in public policymaking. Governments should also ensure the protection of consumer privacy while supporting the free flow of information within global digital environments.

In addition, the Guidelines recognize that unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, particularly within industrialized economies, remain significant contributors to global environmental degradation. Consequently, governments are expected to establish and maintain institutional infrastructures capable of developing, implementing, and monitoring effective consumer protection policies. They should also encourage businesses operating within their jurisdictions to comply fully with applicable national laws and regulatory standards. Furthermore, the potential contributions of universities, public institutions, and private-sector organizations to consumer protection research should be integrated into evidence-based policymaking processes.

Consequently, governments should no longer be viewed solely as regulatory authorities responsible for issuing rules and imposing sanctions. Instead, they should evolve into guardians of consumer sovereignty, capable of developing comprehensive consumer protection ecosystems that respond effectively to the complexities of digital markets. This transformation requires governments to promote responsible business practices through technology-oriented policies, participatory risk communication, and adaptive governance mechanisms that respond to rapid technological change. Consequently, consumer protection communication becomes a strategic instrument for fostering collaboration among governments, businesses, academic institutions, and civil society, ensuring that consumer sovereignty is realized not only through regulatory enforcement but also through education, transparency, innovation, and governance that consistently prioritizes the public interest.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consumer protection communication has evolved from a mechanism primarily concerned with information dissemination into a strategic communication approach aimed at strengthening consumer sovereignty in the digital era. This study demonstrates that consumer protection communication is built upon the synergistic interaction of three principal actors—corporations, consumers, and governments—each of whom performs complementary roles in establishing a marketplace ecosystem that is safe, equitable, transparent, and sustainable.

Digitalization has transformed consumers from passive recipients of protection into active market participants who not only receive protection but also contribute as co-creators, prosumers, and market watchdogs through digital literacy, public participation, and the effective use of emerging technologies. Consequently, the success of consumer protection communication should no longer be evaluated solely by the number of regulations enacted or the reduction of consumer disputes, but rather by its capacity to strengthen consumers' ability to make informed and critical decisions, safeguard their rights, and actively contribute to the development of healthy and accountable markets.

At the same time, this study argues that the future of consumer protection communication requires a paradigm shift toward a collaborative, adaptive, and trust-based communication model. Corporations should integrate consumer protection into their business strategies through greater transparency, robust data protection, continuous innovation, and customer-centric service delivery. Governments should evolve from conventional regulatory authorities into guardians of consumer sovereignty by implementing technology-enabled policies, participatory risk communication, and adaptive governance frameworks that respond effectively to the complexities of digital transformation. Meanwhile, consumers should continuously strengthen their digital literacy, bargaining power, ethical awareness, and digital competencies to navigate increasingly complex digital marketplaces.

Consequently, consumer protection communication should be understood not merely as an instrument for resolving consumer disputes but as a strategic foundation for strengthening consumer sovereignty, enhancing public trust, promoting responsible business practices, and advancing an inclusive, sustainable, and socially oriented digital economy.

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