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Brand Switching in Skincare: The Role of Social Media Marketing, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, and Variety Seeking

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of Indonesia's local skincare industry has intensified competition and increased consumer propensity for brand switching. This study examines the effects of social media marketing (SMM) and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) on brand switching behavior, incorporating variety seeking as a moderating variable. A quantitative approach was employed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) based on data collected from 312 active skincare users in the Greater Jakarta area. The findings show that e-WOM has a significant positive effect on brand switching, highlighting the critical role of peer-generated information in shaping consumer decisions. In contrast, SMM does not exhibit a significant effect, suggesting that firm-generated promotional content alone is insufficient to alter brand preferences in high-involvement product categories. Furthermore, variety seeking demonstrates a strong direct effect on brand switching and negatively moderates the relationship between SMM and brand switching, while its moderating effect on the e-WOM relationship is not significant. These results indicate that consumers with higher novelty-seeking tendencies are less responsive to promotional stimuli but remain influenced by credible interpersonal communication. This study contributes to the literature by integrating digital marketing and psychological perspectives, emphasizing the primacy of socially validated information in driving consumer switching behavior.

Keywords: Brand Switching, Social Media Marketing, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Variety-Seeking, Local Skincare

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia's local skincare industry has expanded rapidly, driven by heightened consumer awareness of skin health and reinforced by behavioral shifts during the pandemic. Reduced reliance on decorative cosmetics and increased attention to skincare routines have reoriented consumption patterns toward treatment-oriented products (Khairani et al., 2021; Rubin, 2020). This transformation is reflected in the cosmetics sector's strong growth, reaching 21.9% in 2023 (Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs, 2024), with skincare emerging as the dominant segment, generating USD 7.23 billion in 2022 (Databoks, 2023). Notably, domestic brands have gained substantial traction, with 60% of consumers expressing

a preference for local products (Statista, 2023). Despite this growth, the market remains highly competitive, particularly in e-commerce environments. Low switching barriers contribute to frequent brand changes. Empirical indications show that 69.7% of consumers have switched skincare brands within six months (Kompas, 2024), highlighting the strategic urgency of understanding switching behavior.

This study investigates the effects of social media marketing and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on brand-switching behavior among local skincare consumers in the Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek) area, incorporating variety-seeking as a moderating variable. Brand switching poses a critical challenge, as it undermines customer retention and long-term firm performance. Prior studies have identified dissatisfaction and novelty-seeking tendencies as key drivers of switching behavior (Ajiwinanto et al., 2021), while eWOM and promotional exposure have also been shown to exert significant influence (Aliefirmanda et al., 2023). However, existing research remains limited in two respects: first, the insufficient integration of social media marketing as a strategic stimulus, and second, the lack of attention to psychological moderators such as variety-seeking. In digitally mediated environments, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok shape consumer judgment processes through both central and peripheral routes, as explained by the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), thereby intensifying exposure to persuasive brand communications.

The novelty of this study lies in the development of an integrative model that simultaneously examines social media marketing and eWOM as key antecedents of brand-switching behavior, while explicitly positioning variety-seeking as a moderating mechanism that conditions these relationships. This approach addresses the fragmentation in prior literature by linking external marketing stimuli with internal consumer predispositions within a single analytical framework. Methodologically, the study employs a quantitative design using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess both direct and interaction effects in a high-growth, digitally intensive market context. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by refining the understanding of switching behavior in emerging markets, and practically by offering actionable insights for local skincare brands to design more adaptive, consumer-centric marketing strategies in highly competitive urban environments.

Consumer Behavior in High-Involvement Products

Consumer behavior encompasses the cognitive and behavioral processes through which individuals evaluate and select products across pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages (Solomon, 2020). In high-involvement product categories such as skincare, decision-making is inherently complex due to perceived functional risk, personal relevance, and long-term usage implications. Consumers are therefore more likely to engage in deeper information processing, actively seeking credible information and comparative evaluations before making decisions.

This implies that consumer responses are not merely reactive but are shaped by the interaction between external marketing stimuli and internal psychological drivers. In digitally mediated environments, exposure to social media marketing (SMM) and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) intensifies this process by continuously presenting choices, thereby increasing the likelihood of brand switching. Consequently, understanding switching behavior requires an integrated perspective that links information exposure, cognitive evaluation, and individual predispositions.

Theoretical Integration: Social Exchange Theory and Elaboration Likelihood Model

This study integrates Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to provide a comprehensive explanation of brand-switching behavior. SET posits that consumers evaluate alternatives based on perceived benefits and costs, including both functional and emotional considerations (Homans, 1958; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). In the

context of digital marketing, SMM and e-WOM act as value signals that shape consumers' perceptions of competing brands. When alternative brands are perceived to offer superior value, switching becomes a rational outcome.

Complementing this, ELM explains how such information is cognitively processed. In high-involvement contexts, consumers are more likely to engage in central route processing, critically evaluating product-related information. However, social media environments simultaneously activate peripheral cues such as visuals, influencers, and narratives (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This dual-processing mechanism is particularly relevant in skincare consumption, where both informational depth and experiential appeal influence decision-making. The integration of SET and ELM thus enables a more robust explanation of how and why consumers shift brand preferences in digital environments.

Social Media Marketing as a High-Involvement Stimulus

Social media marketing should not be viewed merely as a communication tool, but as a strategic stimulus that shapes consumer evaluation processes in high-involvement contexts. Its effectiveness lies in its multidimensional structure, including entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization (Cheung et al., 2021). These dimensions enable SMM to simultaneously deliver informational and experiential value, thereby influencing both central and peripheral processing routes.

Unlike traditional marketing channels, SMM facilitates continuous engagement and real-time interaction, allowing consumers to actively interpret and compare brand messages. The integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and data analytics further enhances personalization and relevance (Shaheen, 2025), strengthening its persuasive capacity. Within this framework, SMM becomes a critical driver of perceived value, which, according to SET, increases the likelihood of brand switching when competing alternatives appear more attractive.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Credibility-Based Evaluation

Electronic word-of-mouth represents a powerful form of peer-generated influence that significantly shapes consumer perceptions, particularly in high-involvement decision contexts. Unlike firm-generated content, e-WOM is often perceived as more credible due to its experiential nature (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Ismagilova et al., 2017). It plays a central role during the evaluation stage, where consumers seek validation and risk reduction before making purchase decisions.

However, the persuasive effectiveness of e-WOM is contingent upon its credibility, consistency, and informational quality, especially in an environment where misinformation is prevalent (Ngo et al., 2024). Rather than acting independently, e-WOM interacts with formal marketing efforts, reinforcing or challenging brand narratives. This interaction intensifies competitive dynamics and increases consumers' propensity to switch brands when alternative options are perceived as more trustworthy or appealing.

Variety-Seeking as a Moderating Psychological Mechanism

Variety-seeking reflects an intrinsic consumer tendency to pursue novelty and alternative experiences, independent of dissatisfaction (Solomon, 2020). In high-involvement product categories, this tendency introduces a critical moderating effect, as consumers who actively seek variety are more responsive to external stimuli such as SMM and e-WOM.

From the perspective of ELM, variety-seeking individuals are more susceptible to both central and peripheral cues, depending on situational factors and cognitive engagement levels. Continuous exposure to diverse brand content on digital platforms further amplifies exploratory behavior, increasing sensitivity to new alternatives. As a result, variety-seeking strengthens the relationship between marketing stimuli and behavioral outcomes, particularly brand switching.

Brand Switching as a Behavioral Outcome

Brand switching represents a behavioral response resulting from the interaction between external influences and internal evaluations. It is driven by a combination of rational assessments, emotional responses, and contextual factors (Zrelli & Rahmoun, 2020; Rialti et al., 2017). In digitally competitive environments, switching behavior is increasingly shaped by the dynamic interplay of marketing communication, peer influence, and individual predispositions.

Integrating SET and ELM suggests that switching occurs when consumers perceive greater value in alternative brands and process persuasive information in a way that supports such evaluation. This highlights that brand switching is not merely a reaction to dissatisfaction, but a strategic consumer response influenced by both cognitive and psychological mechanisms.

Research Hypotheses

The Effect of Social Media Marketing on Brand Switching

Social media marketing functions as a strategic stimulus that shapes consumer perceptions through both informational and experiential content. In high-involvement contexts, consumers actively evaluate such content, while also being influenced by peripheral cues embedded within digital platforms. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, SMM enhances perceived value by presenting attractive alternatives, thereby increasing the likelihood of switching behavior. Empirical evidence consistently supports the significant role of SMM in influencing brand-switching decisions (Ali & Shaiq, 2023; Rooroh et al., 2024).

H1: Social media marketing significantly affects brand switching.

The Effect of Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Brand Switching

Electronic word-of-mouth plays a critical role in shaping consumer evaluations by providing credible and experience-based information. In high-involvement product categories, consumers rely heavily on such information to reduce uncertainty and validate purchase decisions. From the perspective of SET, positive evaluations of alternative brands communicated through e-WOM increase perceived benefits, thereby encouraging switching behavior. Prior studies confirm the significant impact of e-WOM on brand-switching intentions (Aliefirmanda et al., 2023; Palma et al., 2021).

H2: E-WOM has a significant effect on brand switching.

The Moderating Role of Variety-Seeking on the Relationship Between Social Media Marketing and Brand Switching

Variety-seeking intensifies consumers' responsiveness to social media stimuli by increasing their openness to new experiences and alternative brands. Within the ELM framework, individuals with high variety-seeking tendencies are more likely to process both central and peripheral cues, thereby amplifying the influence of SMM on decision-making. Consequently, the impact of SMM on brand switching is expected to vary depending on the level of variety-seeking behavior.

H3: Variety seeking moderates the relationship between social media marketing and brand switching.

The Moderating Role of Variety-Seeking on the Relationship Between E-WOM and Brand Switching

The influence of e-WOM is also contingent upon consumers' psychological predispositions. Individuals with strong variety-seeking tendencies are more likely to respond to peer-generated information, particularly when exposed to novel or contrasting brand experiences. From an ELM perspective, such individuals exhibit flexible processing patterns

that enhance the persuasive effect of e-WOM. Therefore, variety-seeking is expected to strengthen the relationship between e-WOM and brand-switching behavior.

H4: Variety seeking moderates the relationship between electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) and brand switching.

Theoretical Framework

The research model is shown in Figure 1.

Source: Research Results

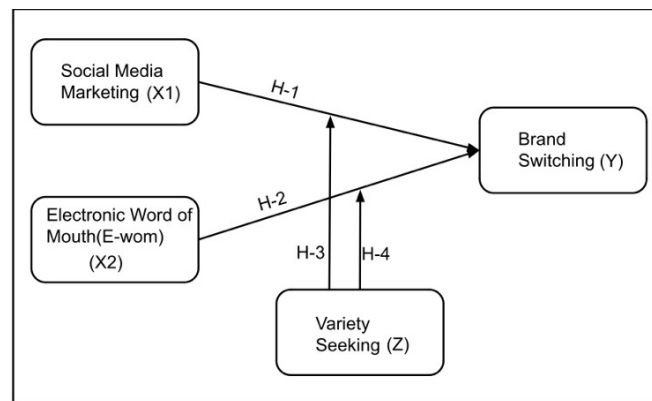


Figure 1. Research Model

METHOD

Research design

This study adopts a quantitative approach with an associative research design to examine the relationships between social media marketing (SMM), electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and brand switching behavior, with variety-seeking as a moderating variable. The focus on quantification enables the systematic testing of theoretically grounded relationships using advanced statistical modeling. The unit of analysis consists of individuals aged 18 to 40 who actively use local skincare products and reside in the Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek) region, a demographic segment characterized by high digital engagement and consumption intensity.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the selection of respondents who meet specific research criteria, namely active usage of local skincare products, age between 18 and 40 years, and domicile within Jabodetabek. This demographic focus is theoretically justified, as prior industry reports (YCP Solidiance; Meltwater) identify this segment as the primary driver of skincare consumption and social media interaction in Indonesia. The inclusion criteria were explicitly stated at the beginning of the online questionnaire to enhance sample validity and ensure data relevance.

The minimum sample size was determined based on Ferdinand's (2014) guideline, which recommends a ratio of five to ten observations per indicator. Given the 39 indicators used in this study, the minimum required sample size was 195 respondents. However, to improve statistical power and model stability, the study targeted a minimum of 300 respondents. Data were collected between February and June 2025 through an online survey administered via Google Forms. All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The use of a five-point scale is appropriate in this context as it balances measurement sensitivity and respondent reliability, reduces cognitive burden, and minimizes response bias, particularly in online survey settings. Moreover, it is widely recognized as sufficient for capturing attitudinal constructs in behavioral research while maintaining robust statistical performance in structural equation modeling.

This study examines four primary constructs: social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, variety-seeking, and brand switching. Each construct was operationalized using established and validated measurement scales to ensure content validity and comparability with

prior studies. Social media marketing was measured using the multidimensional framework proposed by Cheung et al. (2021), encompassing entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization. Electronic word-of-mouth was operationalized based on Goyette et al. (2010) and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), covering intensity, content, positive opinions, and negative opinions. Variety-seeking was measured through indicators reflecting boredom, curiosity, and exploratory tendencies (Palma et al., 2021). Brand switching was assessed using dimensions related to internal and external influences, as well as emotional and rational responses (Zrelli & Rahmoun, 2020; Palma et al., 2021).

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS version 4.1.1.2. The choice of PLS-SEM over covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) is methodologically justified by several considerations. First, this study aims to predict and explain complex relationships involving a moderating variable rather than to confirm an established theory, making PLS-SEM more appropriate due to its predictive orientation. Second, PLS-SEM is more robust in handling complex models with multiple constructs and indicators, as well as moderate sample sizes. Third, it does not require strict assumptions of multivariate normality, which is particularly relevant for behavioral data collected through online surveys. These advantages make PLS-SEM a suitable analytical approach for examining the proposed model in an exploratory and context-specific setting.

The analysis followed a two-stage procedure, consisting of outer model and inner model evaluation. The outer model assessment included tests of convergent validity (factor loadings and average variance extracted), discriminant validity, and reliability (composite reliability and Cronbach’s alpha). The inner model was evaluated using bootstrapping procedures to estimate path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values. Model fit was assessed using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), while predictive relevance and explanatory power were evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (F^2). This comprehensive analytical procedure ensures the robustness and validity of the findings, providing empirical support for hypothesis testing and offering meaningful insights into brand-switching behavior in the digital skincare market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Of the 326 participants who completed the survey, 312 met the inclusion criteria. They were between 18 and 40 years old, lived in the Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek) area, and had prior experience purchasing local skincare products. Most respondents were female (82.5%) and within the targeted age range (96.3%). These findings align with those of YCP Solidiance (2024) and Statista (2023), which identify this demographic as the primary users of skincare products and social media platforms in Indonesia.

Geographically, most respondents were based in Jakarta (29.1%), followed by those in Tangerang, Depok, Bogor, and Bekasi. In terms of occupation, the largest segment was students (50.6%), followed by private-sector employees (34.4%) and entrepreneurs (15%). Most reported a monthly income between IDR 1,000,000 and 5,000,000 (62.9%), and 84.7% indicated that their monthly skincare spending was below IDR 1,000,000.

Regarding purchasing behavior, 41.4% of respondents reported buying local skincare products fewer than three times per month, while 33.7% made purchases three to five times per month. These figures suggest that respondents were active skincare users with moderate purchasing power and high exposure to social media content.

Indicator Reliability and Construct Validity

Table 1: The Results of Loading Factors

Construct	Indicator	Loading
SMM	SMM2	0.745

	SMM4	0.703
	SMM6	0.780
	SMM10	0.724
	SMM12	0.729
EWOM	EWOM4	0.714
	EWOM6	0.784
	EWOM8	0.749
	EWOM9	0.717
Variety Seeking	VS1	0.769
	VS2	0.807
	VS8	0.775
Brand Switching	BS1	0.730
	BS5	0.725
	BS7	0.724
	BS8	0.728

Source: Processed Primary Data by SmartPLS (2025)

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity Summary

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Brand Switching	0.703	0.703	0.528
EWOM	0.727	0.731	0.550
Social Media Marketing	0.789	0.793	0.542
Variety Seeking	0.691	0.695	0.614

Source: Processed Primary Data by SmartPLS (2025)

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (Cross-Loadings – Condensed Version)

Indicator	BS	EWOM	SMM	VS
BS1	0.730	0.359	0.361	0.516
BS5	0.725	0.394	0.383	0.393
BS7	0.724	0.487	0.380	0.333
BS8	0.728	0.329	0.361	0.501
EWOM4	0.393	0.714	0.502	0.223
EWOM6	0.418	0.784	0.504	0.324
EWOM8	0.426	0.749	0.545	0.421
EWOM9	0.348	0.717	0.388	0.270
SMM2	0.399	0.536	0.745	0.391
SMM4	0.337	0.423	0.703	0.307
SMM6	0.400	0.527	0.780	0.410
SMM10	0.402	0.487	0.724	0.323
SMM12	0.326	0.436	0.729	0.298
VS1	0.434	0.206	0.312	0.769
VS2	0.408	0.312	0.316	0.807
VS8	0.552	0.441	0.456	0.775

Source: Processed Primary Data by SmartPLS (2025)

Table 4. Interaction Effects (Moderating Constructs)

Interaction Term	BS	EWOM	SMM	VS
VS × EWOM	-0.380	-0.581	-0.466	-0.266
VS × SMM	-0.417	-0.467	-0.466	-0.320

Source: Processed Primary Data by SmartPLS (2025)

The reliability of the indicators was confirmed as all outer loading values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong correlations between the observed items and their respective latent constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Internal consistency was demonstrated through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). All constructs surpassed the minimum acceptable values of 0.60 for alpha and 0.70 for CR, thereby affirming the reliability of the measurement model.

Convergent validity was also established as each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) value exceeded the 0.50 benchmark. This suggests that a substantial portion of the variance is explained by the indicators. Discriminant validity was also supported, as the indicators loaded more strongly on their intended constructs than on others, and the square roots of the AVE values were greater than the inter-construct correlations, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Structural Model Evaluation

Table 5. Model Explanatory Power (R² Summary)

Endogenous Variable	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Interpretation
Brand Switching	0.484	0.476	Moderate explanatory power

Source: Processed Primary Data by SmartPLS (2025)

Table 6. Effect Size (f²) Summary

Predictor → Outcome	f ²	Effect Size
EWOM → Brand Switching	0.060	Small
Social Media Marketing → Brand Switching	0.008	Negligible
Variety Seeking → Brand Switching	0.241	Medium
Variety Seeking × EWOM → Brand Switching	0.004	Negligible
Variety Seeking × SMM → Brand Switching	0.020	Small

Source: Processed Primary Data by SmartPLS (2025)

The coefficient of determination (R²) for brand switching was found to be 0.484. This indicates that, when moderated by variety seeking, social media marketing and electronic word of mouth collectively explain 48.4% of the variance in brand switching behavior. According to Hair et al. (2019), this reflects a moderate level of explanatory power within the model.

An effect size (f²) analysis revealed that variety seeking had a moderate effect on brand switching (f² = 0.241), while electronic word-of-mouth had a small effect (f² = 0.060). In contrast, social media marketing's contribution was minimal (f² = 0.008), indicating a negligible effect. Furthermore, the moderation effects of variety seeking were either small or statistically insignificant, suggesting limited interaction influence within the tested model.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 7. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β (O)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	SMM → Brand Switching	0.093	1.588	0.112	Not Supported
H2	EWOM → Brand Switching	0.263	3.573	0.000	Supported
H3	Variety Seeking × SMM → Brand Switching	-0.120	2.063	0.039	Supported
H4	Variety Seeking × EWOM → Brand Switching	0.056	0.801	0.423	Not Supported
—	Variety Seeking → Brand Switching	0.411	6.303	0.000	Significant

Source: Processed Primary Data by SmartPLS (2025)

The path coefficient analysis yielded mixed results in relation to the proposed hypotheses. First, the effect of social media marketing on brand switching was found to be statistically insignificant (t = 1.588, p = 0.112). This indicates that promotional activities conducted through social media platforms alone may not be enough to change the brands that local skincare consumers prefer. However, electronic word-of-mouth marketing was found to have a significant positive influence on brand switching (t = 3.573, p = 0.000), which reinforces the idea that digital communication generated by peers plays a persuasive role in shaping consumer decisions and promoting brand exploration.

Additionally, variety seeking was found to negatively moderate the relationship between social media marketing and brand switching ($t = 2.063$, $p = 0.039$). This suggests that consumers with higher novelty-seeking tendencies are less influenced by promotional content and more inclined to switch brands regardless of exposure to marketing efforts. However, the moderating effect of variety seeking on the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and brand switching was not statistically significant ($t = 0.801$, $p = 0.423$). This implies that the persuasive impact of electronic word-of-mouth operates independently of consumers' predisposition toward variety.

Discussion

The empirical results indicate that social media marketing (SMM) does not exert a statistically significant direct effect on brand-switching behavior among local skincare consumers. This outcome suggests that, within high-involvement product categories, promotional exposure alone is insufficient to alter established preferences. Consumers engage in more deliberate and cognitively intensive evaluation, consistent with the central route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This finding aligns with recent international studies emphasizing that, in high-risk consumption contexts such as cosmetics and personal care, consumers prioritize diagnostic information over hedonic or visually driven stimuli (e.g., Dwivedi et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Consequently, while SMM may enhance brand awareness and engagement, its direct influence on switching behavior appears limited when consumers require credible and substantive product validation.

In contrast, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) demonstrates a significant and positive influence on brand switching, reinforcing its role as a dominant driver of consumer decision-making in digital environments. This finding is theoretically consistent with Social Exchange Theory, as consumers reassess brand choices when alternative options are perceived to offer superior value through peer-generated information (Homans, 1958). Importantly, this result corroborates a growing body of international evidence highlighting the increasing reliance on user-generated content in high-involvement purchases, where trust, authenticity, and experiential relevance are critical (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Filieri et al., 2021). Compared to firm-generated messages, e-WOM reduces perceived risk and enhances confidence in switching decisions, particularly in product categories where performance uncertainty remains high.

Notably, these findings diverge from prior studies that position promotional strategies as primary determinants of switching behavior (e.g., Aliefirmanda et al., 2023). The present study instead indicates a structural shift in consumer evaluation mechanisms, where peer-based credibility outweighs brand-controlled communication. This shift reflects broader transformations in digital consumer behavior, as documented in recent international research, which shows that consumers increasingly privilege decentralized, community-driven information over traditional marketing narratives (Rosário et al., 2021). Such divergence underscores the contextual sensitivity of SMM effectiveness and highlights the need to reassess its role in markets characterized by high digital saturation and information transparency.

The moderating analysis further refines this understanding by demonstrating that variety-seeking significantly weakens the relationship between SMM and brand switching. This suggests that consumers with a strong preference for novelty are less dependent on structured marketing stimuli, as their switching behavior is internally driven rather than externally influenced. This finding is consistent with recent behavioral studies indicating that high variety-seekers exhibit autonomous exploratory tendencies, often bypassing formal promotional cues in favor of spontaneous or curiosity-driven decisions (Trijp & Inman, 2022). In contrast, the moderating effect of variety-seeking on the e-WOM relationship is not statistically significant, indicating that the persuasive strength of peer-generated information remains robust across different psychological profiles.

Taken together, these results provide a more nuanced understanding of switching behavior by integrating external stimuli and internal predispositions within a single analytical framework. The findings suggest that while SMM operates primarily as a peripheral or supportive influence, e-WOM functions as a central determinant in high-involvement decision-making. This distinction is critical, as it clarifies the differential roles of marketing channels in shaping consumer behavior, thereby addressing inconsistencies observed in prior literature.

From a strategic perspective, the study implies that firms operating in competitive skincare markets should recalibrate their digital marketing priorities. Rather than relying predominantly on curated promotional content, organizations should invest in mechanisms that stimulate authentic consumer interaction, including review systems, user-generated content, and community-based engagement. Such strategies not only enhance credibility but also align more closely with contemporary consumer decision processes, where trust and experiential validation outweigh traditional persuasive tactics.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media marketing does not exert a significant direct influence on brand-switching behavior in high-involvement product contexts such as skincare, where consumers rely on cognitively demanding evaluations and credible information sources. In contrast, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) emerges as a significant and dominant driver, confirming the critical role of peer-generated content in shaping switching decisions. The moderating analysis further reveals that variety-seeking weakens the effect of social media marketing, indicating that novelty-oriented consumers are less responsive to structured promotional stimuli. However, variety-seeking does not significantly alter the influence of e-WOM, suggesting that the persuasive power of peer communication remains stable across different consumer profiles. Collectively, these findings highlight a structural shift in consumer decision-making, where credibility and experiential validation outweigh traditional promotional efforts.

Theoretically, this study contributes by advancing an integrated explanatory framework that combines Social Exchange Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to demonstrate that, in high-involvement product categories, brand-switching behavior is driven primarily by credibility-based peer communication (e-WOM) rather than firm-generated social media marketing, with variety-seeking functioning as a boundary condition that selectively attenuates the effectiveness of promotional stimuli. This concise formulation clarifies the distinct yet interrelated roles of external stimuli and internal predispositions, addressing the fragmentation in prior literature and offering a more coherent understanding of digital consumer behavior.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that local skincare brands should prioritize e-WOM as a central strategic lever. Firms are encouraged to cultivate authentic consumer engagement through user-generated content, transparent review systems, and community-driven interactions that enhance trust and perceived value. Additionally, marketing strategies should be adapted to accommodate variety-seeking consumers by introducing product innovation, limited editions, and creative collaborations that stimulate exploratory behavior without relying solely on conventional promotional tactics.

This study also opens several avenues for future research. Further investigation is needed to incorporate additional mediating and moderating variables, such as perceived risk, brand attachment, and consumer engagement, to deepen the explanatory power of the model. Expanding the empirical context to other high-involvement industries, including healthcare, consumer electronics, and automotive sectors, would allow for broader generalization. Moreover, the application of advanced analytical techniques, such as segmentation or multi-group analysis, may provide more granular insights into heterogeneous consumer behavior across different demographic and psychographic profiles.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. The absence of certain explanatory variables may have constrained the interpretation of the non-significant effect of social media marketing. The moderating role of variety-seeking was only partially supported, indicating the need for alternative approaches to capture consumer heterogeneity more effectively. Furthermore, the lack of focus on specific brands limits contextual depth, while the absence of negatively worded items may introduce response bias. Finally, the cross-sectional design and restricted data collection period may not fully capture dynamic changes in consumer behavior. Future research should address these limitations by refining the research model, incorporating longitudinal designs, and expanding the scope of analysis to enhance both internal and external validity.

Theoretical Contributions

Conceptual Theoretical Innovation (CTI)

This study advances a concise yet integrative framework that links social media marketing (SMM), electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and variety-seeking to explain brand-switching behavior in digital contexts. Rather than treating these constructs independently, the model positions variety-seeking as a psychological moderator that conditions how external stimuli translate into behavioral outcomes. This integration offers a more precise account of how digital marketing inputs interact with internal consumer predispositions.

A central contribution lies in reframing the role of SMM in high-involvement product categories. The findings indicate that SMM does not exert a significant direct effect on brand switching, challenging the common assumption that exposure to brand-generated content is sufficient to drive behavioral change. Instead, its influence appears conditional, requiring deeper cognitive processing and credible reinforcement to become effective. This shifts the theoretical interpretation of SMM from a primary driver to a contingent and context-dependent stimulus.

In contrast, e-WOM emerges as the dominant mechanism shaping switching behavior, operating through credibility, trust, and experiential relevance. This distinction sharpens existing theoretical perspectives by demonstrating that persuasive effectiveness in digital environments depends less on message delivery and more on source authenticity. Together, these insights contribute to a more coherent understanding of digital consumer behavior by clarifying the differentiated roles of firm-generated and peer-generated communication.

Empirical Synthesis Insight (ESI)

This study contributes to the empirical literature by resolving inconsistencies in prior findings and establishing a clearer hierarchy of influence among digital marketing variables. The results demonstrate that:

1. Electronic word-of-mouth exerts a significant and positive effect on brand switching, confirming its dominant role in shaping consumer decisions.
2. Social media marketing does not significantly influence brand switching, contradicting several earlier studies that positioned it as a primary driver.
3. Variety seeking has a strong direct effect on brand switching, supported by a moderate effect size ($f^2 = 0.241$).
4. The moderating effect of variety seeking is asymmetric, significantly weakening the relationship between SMM and brand switching while showing no significant interaction effect with e-WOM.

These findings yield an important empirical insight: Digital marketing stimuli are not uniformly effective; their influence is conditional upon both the nature of the communication source and the psychological orientation of the consumer.

By distinguishing between firm-generated content (SMM) and consumer-generated content (e-WOM), this study provides a refined empirical synthesis that highlights the superior persuasive power of peer-driven communication in high-involvement contexts.

Novel Perspective Advancement (NPA)

This study advances the literature by addressing several critical theoretical gaps.

First, it bridges the fragmented application of Social Exchange Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by integrating them into a cohesive explanatory framework. Specifically:

1. e-WOM is interpreted through the lens of value exchange and trust formation, as proposed by Social Exchange Theory.
2. SMM and variety-seeking dynamics are explained through central and peripheral processing routes, as articulated in ELM.

Second, the study extends the role of variety seeking beyond a direct predictor, demonstrating its function as a conditional boundary factor that alters the effectiveness of marketing stimuli. The finding that variety seeking weakens the impact of SMM introduces a critical nuance: not all psychological traits amplify marketing effects; some may attenuate them.

Third, the study introduces a novel theoretical perspective by asserting the following: In digitally mediated consumption contexts, brand switching is more strongly driven by socially validated information than by firm-controlled promotional efforts.

This perspective shifts the analytical focus from firm-centric communication strategies to consumer-driven influence mechanisms, reflecting the evolving dynamics of contemporary digital markets.

Model Robustness and Analytical Contribution

From a methodological standpoint, this study demonstrates a robust analytical framework through the application of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The model exhibits moderate explanatory power, with an R^2 value of 0.484, indicating that the selected variables account for a substantial proportion of variance in brand switching behavior.

The measurement model satisfies established criteria for reliability and validity, including:

1. Adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability above threshold levels)
2. Strong convergent validity ($AVE > 0.50$)
3. Satisfactory discriminant validity

Importantly, the inclusion of effect size (f^2) analysis enhances the interpretive depth of the findings. While SMM demonstrates negligible influence ($f^2 = 0.008$), variety seeking emerges as a dominant predictor, and e-WOM exhibits a meaningful, albeit smaller, effect. This analytical approach underscores that statistical significance alone is insufficient for theoretical interpretation and must be complemented by an assessment of practical effect magnitude.

Integrative Theoretical Synthesis

This study culminates in an integrative theoretical synthesis that redefines the dynamics of brand switching in digital contexts. The findings collectively suggest the following:

1. Digital persuasion operates through differentiated mechanisms, where credibility and relational trust outweigh mere exposure.
2. Consumers exhibit increasing autonomy and selectivity, particularly those with high variety-seeking tendencies, reducing susceptibility to conventional promotional strategies.

3. The locus of influence has shifted from firms to consumer networks, emphasizing the centrality of peer-generated content.
4. Behavioral outcomes are shaped by the interaction between external stimuli and internal psychological traits, necessitating more complex and adaptive theoretical models.

Accordingly, this study advances a refined conceptualization of consumer behavior by positioning the following:

The interplay between digital communication sources and individual psychological predispositions is the primary driver of brand switching in contemporary markets.

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