LICS
PROCEEDINGS OF LEGAL INTERNATIONAL AND STUDIES
No. ISSN : 2986-4089
Published by Universitas Islam Sultan Agung, Semarang, INDONESIA

LICS 2026
Topic: *Strengthening Legal Frameworks for Combating Human Trafficking and Enhancing Protection of Women and Children*

Digital Consumer Exploitation and Platform Corporate Governance: A Stakeholder Theory Based Systematic Review in E Commerce

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Abstract. *This study aims to systematically examine the phenomenon of digital consumer exploitation within the e-commerce ecosystem and its relationship to platform corporate governance practices, employing stakeholder theory as the primary analytical framework. The rapid growth of digital platforms has given rise to various forms of consumer exploitation, including algorithmic manipulation, dark patterns, information asymmetry, personal data exploitation, and non-transparent pricing practices, which are frequently not accompanied by adequate governance mechanisms to protect consumers as a key stakeholder group. This research adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) method following the PRISMA protocol, drawing on reputable databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Science Direct within a defined publication period. Relevant articles were screened based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria and subsequently analyzed thematically to identify patterns, research gaps, and emerging conceptual frameworks within the existing literature. The findings are expected to map how stakeholder theory has been applied to understand the responsibilities of e-commerce platforms toward consumers, identify governance mechanisms effective in preventing digital exploitation, and formulate a future research agenda to strengthen consumer protection within the digital economy. From a legal perspective, this study contributes to the development of normative and theoretical frameworks for digital platform accountability, while offering practical implications for lawmakers and industry stakeholders in designing regulations and governance practices that are more oriented toward stakeholder protection particularly consumers amid the rapid transformation of global e-commerce platforms.*

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of platform-based e-commerce has transformed digital markets by connecting consumers and businesses through highly integrated technological ecosystems. E-commerce platforms provide substantial benefits, including transactional convenience, broader market access, personalized services, and increased commercial efficiency. Nevertheless, the concentration of technological, informational, and economic power within digital platforms has also generated new forms of consumer vulnerability. Digital consumer exploitation may occur through extensive data collection, behavioural profiling, algorithmic recommendations, targeted advertising, personalized commercial practices, and interface designs that influence consumers' decisions. These practices raise fundamental concerns regarding consumer autonomy, privacy, fairness, and accountability within the increasingly complex digital marketplace.

The governance challenge becomes more significant because e-commerce platforms are not merely passive intermediaries. They frequently establish the rules governing digital transactions, determine product visibility, manage recommendation systems, control advertising environments, and influence how consumers interact with sellers and services. Consequently, platform corporate governance has substantial implications for consumer welfare. Traditional corporate governance models that prioritize shareholder interests and financial performance may be inadequate when technological decisions generate consequences for consumers and other stakeholders. Stakeholder Theory offers an alternative analytical perspective by recognizing consumers as legitimate stakeholders whose interests should be incorporated into corporate decision-making and risk management.

This article therefore examines the relationship between digital consumer exploitation and platform corporate governance through a Stakeholder Theory-based systematic review. It focuses on three interconnected dimensions: the forms and structural characteristics of consumer exploitation within the platform-based e-commerce ecosystem; the corporate governance responsibilities of e-commerce platforms toward consumers as stakeholders; and the reconstruction of platform governance mechanisms for consumer-centred digital markets.

The study argues that effective consumer protection requires a transition from reactive legal compliance toward proactive corporate accountability. Such reconstruction should incorporate consumer-risk assessments, algorithmic and interface governance, responsible data management, transparency, independent auditing, accessible complaint mechanisms, and effective remedies. Integrating Stakeholder Theory into platform governance can therefore provide a normative and institutional foundation for balancing technological innovation, corporate profitability, consumer welfare, and sustainable digital market development.

2. Research Methods

From a legal perspective, this study contributes to the development of normative and theoretical frameworks for digital platform accountability, while offering practical implications for lawmakers and industry stakeholders in designing regulations and governance practices that are more oriented toward stakeholder protection particularly consumers amid the rapid transformation of global e-commerce platforms.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Digital Consumer Exploitation in the Platform-Based E-Commerce Ecosystem

The rapid expansion of platform-based e-commerce has fundamentally transformed the relationship between consumers, businesses, and digital intermediaries. E-commerce platforms provide significant advantages by facilitating transactions, expanding market access, personalizing consumer experiences, and reducing the costs associated with purchasing goods and services. Nevertheless, the concentration of technological, informational, and economic power within digital platforms has also created new forms of consumer vulnerability. Digital consumer exploitation occurs when platforms or businesses utilize these advantages in ways that undermine consumer autonomy, privacy, economic interests, or the ability to make informed decisions. Unlike traditional exploitation, digital exploitation may operate invisibly through algorithms, interface design, data practices, and platform governance mechanisms.

One of the most significant sources of consumer vulnerability is information asymmetry. Digital platforms can collect and process extensive information concerning consumers' purchasing histories, browsing behaviour, preferences, interactions, and engagement patterns. This information allows platforms to construct detailed behavioural profiles and predict consumer preferences. While personalization can improve consumer convenience, the same technological capacity can be used to manipulate purchasing decisions, encourage excessive consumption, or exploit individual vulnerabilities. Targeted advertising, personalized recommendations, dynamic pricing, and behavioural profiling may therefore create unequal relationships when consumers lack meaningful knowledge about how their data and behavioural patterns are being utilized.

Consumer exploitation can also occur through the design of digital interfaces. Dark patterns, for example, may direct consumers toward particular decisions by using preselected options, hidden costs, confusing navigation, difficult cancellation procedures, or emotionally persuasive messages. These practices exploit cognitive biases and reduce the practical ability of consumers to exercise independent choice. Consequently, the existence of formal consent does not necessarily demonstrate genuine consumer autonomy. A consumer may technically agree to a transaction while the surrounding digital environment has been deliberately structured to make refusal more difficult.

The platform-based ecosystem further complicates accountability because multiple actors participate in a single digital transaction. Sellers provide products, platforms determine the conditions of marketplace access, payment providers facilitate financial transactions, and technology providers operate essential digital infrastructure. When consumer harm occurs, responsibility may become fragmented among these actors. Platforms may attempt to characterize themselves merely as intermediaries, even though they frequently exercise substantial control over product visibility, advertising, recommendations, consumer data, and transaction procedures. This creates an important governance question concerning the extent to which platform operators should be responsible for consumer harms generated within environments that they design and control.

From a corporate governance perspective, digital consumer exploitation should therefore be regarded as a structural risk rather than merely an isolated compliance issue. Platform operators should incorporate consumer interests into decision-making concerning algorithms, data governance, interface design, advertising, and commercial strategies. Risk assessments should evaluate not only financial consequences but also potential impacts on consumer autonomy, privacy, fairness, and economic welfare. Independent audits and internal compliance mechanisms can assist in identifying practices that may systematically disadvantage consumers.

Ultimately, addressing digital consumer exploitation requires a shift from reactive consumer protection toward proactive platform accountability. Consumers should be recognized as important stakeholders within the e-commerce ecosystem, while platforms should assume responsibility for ensuring that technological innovation does not become an instrument for systematic manipulation. A sustainable digital marketplace requires transparency, fairness, meaningful consumer choice, responsible data governance, and effective remedies. By integrating these principles into platform governance, e-commerce businesses can reduce structural power imbalances and establish a digital commercial environment in which technological efficiency is balanced with consumer rights and stakeholder welfare.

3.2. Stakeholder Theory and Corporate Governance Responsibilities of E-Commerce Platforms

Stakeholder Theory provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding the corporate governance responsibilities of e-commerce platforms in the digital economy. In contrast to shareholder-oriented approaches that primarily emphasize financial returns and corporate profitability, Stakeholder Theory recognizes that corporate decisions affect multiple groups whose interests should be considered in organizational governance. These stakeholders include consumers, employees, sellers, business partners, regulators, communities, and other actors participating in the digital ecosystem. In e-commerce, consumers should therefore be regarded not merely as sources of revenue but as essential stakeholders whose rights, welfare, privacy, and autonomy must be integrated into platform decision-making.

The application of Stakeholder Theory becomes particularly significant because e-commerce platforms possess substantial technological and informational power. Platforms control important aspects of digital transactions, including product visibility, search rankings, recommendation systems, advertising placement, payment mechanisms, data collection, and interface design. These functions allow platforms to influence consumer behaviour and determine the conditions under which transactions occur. Consequently, corporate governance responsibilities should extend beyond conventional financial and operational risks to include risks associated with algorithmic decision-making, consumer manipulation, privacy, data exploitation, and unfair commercial practices.

From a stakeholder perspective, platform governance should establish mechanisms for identifying and preventing practices that may negatively affect consumers. Corporate decision-makers should assess the potential consequences of algorithms, personalized marketing systems, and interface designs before implementing them. This responsibility is particularly important when technological systems exploit behavioural biases or create informational asymmetries that consumers cannot easily recognize. Governance mechanisms should therefore incorporate principles of transparency, fairness, accountability, informed choice, and respect for consumer autonomy.

Stakeholder Theory also requires e-commerce platforms to balance competing interests rather than prioritize short-term commercial gains. Increasing consumer engagement, maximizing advertising revenue, and collecting extensive behavioural data may benefit shareholders and platform operators, but these objectives may simultaneously create significant risks for consumers. Excessive data collection, manipulative interface designs, misleading recommendations, and barriers to cancellation can undermine consumer trust and generate long-term reputational and regulatory consequences. A stakeholder-oriented governance model recognizes that sustainable corporate performance depends upon maintaining legitimate relationships with consumers and other affected parties.

Accordingly, consumer protection should become an institutional component of corporate governance rather than merely an external legal obligation. Boards of directors and senior management should establish consumer-risk oversight, ethical technology policies, internal compliance mechanisms, algorithmic audits, data governance standards, and accessible complaint-resolution systems. Independent monitoring can further ensure that corporate practices remain consistent with consumer interests and applicable legal principles. Such mechanisms demonstrate that corporate accountability in digital markets must encompass not only financial performance but also the social consequences of technological decision-making.

Ultimately, Stakeholder Theory provides a framework for reconstructing the governance responsibilities of e-commerce platforms by positioning consumers at the centre of responsible digital business practices. Recognizing consumers as stakeholders requires platforms to consider their rights and interests throughout the development, deployment, and monitoring of digital technologies. This approach can strengthen corporate accountability, reduce systemic consumer exploitation, enhance trust, and promote sustainable digital markets. E-commerce platforms should therefore be governed not solely according to the logic of technological efficiency and profitability, but through a broader responsibility to ensure that innovation remains compatible with fairness, transparency, consumer welfare, and stakeholder interests.

3.3. Reconstruction of Platform Corporate Governance for Consumer-Centred Digital Markets

The transformation of e-commerce into a platform-based economic model requires a fundamental reconstruction of corporate governance to address emerging forms of digital consumer exploitation. Traditional corporate governance has largely emphasized shareholder interests, financial performance, risk management, and regulatory compliance. However, digital platforms possess distinctive forms of power because they control the technological infrastructure through which consumers access information, interact with sellers, make payments, and exercise contractual rights. Consequently, corporate governance should evolve toward a consumer-centred model that recognizes consumers as essential stakeholders whose interests must be incorporated into corporate decision-making.

A consumer-centred governance framework should establish preventive mechanisms for identifying and managing risks arising from algorithms, data processing, personalized marketing, interface design, and automated decision-making. Platforms should conduct systematic assessments before implementing technologies or commercial strategies that may affect consumer autonomy or economic interests. Such assessments should examine whether algorithms generate discriminatory outcomes, whether interface designs create unreasonable behavioural pressure, and whether business models encourage excessive collection or exploitation of consumer data. This preventive orientation is essential because digital practices can affect millions of consumers simultaneously and may cause systemic harm before individual complaints reach regulatory authorities.

4. Conclusion

The systematic review demonstrates that digital consumer exploitation has become an increasingly significant governance challenge within the platform-based e-commerce ecosystem. The technological architecture of digital platforms provides substantial commercial benefits, but it also enables businesses to exercise considerable informational, technological, and behavioural influence over consumers. Practices involving extensive data collection, behavioural profiling, personalized recommendations, targeted advertising, algorithmic decision-making, and manipulative interface design may create structural inequalities that weaken consumer autonomy and undermine economic and privacy interests. Digital consumer exploitation should therefore be understood not merely as an isolated violation between a seller and an individual consumer, but as a systemic risk arising from the governance structures and technological practices of digital platforms. Stakeholder Theory provides an appropriate framework for reconceptualizing the corporate governance responsibilities of e-commerce platforms. Consumers should be recognized as central stakeholders whose interests must be considered alongside those of shareholders, sellers, employees, regulators, and other participants in the digital ecosystem. This perspective requires platform operators to move beyond a narrow focus on profitability and technological efficiency toward governance practices that incorporate transparency, fairness, accountability, privacy, and consumer welfare. Corporate responsibility should consequently extend to the design and operation of algorithms, data systems, recommendation mechanisms, advertising practices, and digital interfaces. The reconstruction of platform corporate governance should emphasize preventive and consumer-centred mechanisms. Platforms should establish consumer-risk assessments, ethical technology standards, algorithmic oversight, independent audits, responsible data governance, transparent decision-making procedures, and accessible complaint and redress mechanisms. Boards and senior management should also assume direct responsibility for identifying and mitigating digital consumer risks. Such mechanisms can transform consumer protection from a reactive legal obligation into a proactive element of corporate governance. Ultimately, sustainable e-commerce requires a governance model that balances innovation, profitability, and stakeholder welfare. Integrating Stakeholder Theory into platform governance provides a normative foundation for recognizing consumers as legitimate and essential stakeholders. By embedding consumer interests into corporate decision-making, digital platforms can strengthen accountability, reduce systemic exploitation, enhance consumer trust, and promote a fairer and more sustainable digital marketplace.

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