



**THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF RELATIONSHIP
MARKETING STRATEGY BETWEEN DIGITAL MARKETING
STRATEGY AND CONSUMERS' PURCHASE DECISIONS
IN THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract:

The intent of this research is to scrutinise the impact of digital marketing strategies applied by marketers in the automotive industry in Malaysia in aiding consumers to make purchase decisions. In reality, marketers know that digital marketing strategies alone will not lead to consumers' purchase decisions because not all consumers can be motivated by digitalisation. Another significant factor in influencing consumers' purchase decisions is relationship marketing strategies. Therefore, the interceding impact of relationship marketing strategy between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions was analysed in this study to support the research hypothesis. A total of 605 marketers employed in the automotive industry furnished the data for this study. Moreover, in-depth literature was reviewed to expose the association between digital marketing strategies, relationship marketing strategies, and consumers' purchase decisions. The findings of this research indicated a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and relationship marketing strategy as well as consumers' purchase decisions. Conclusively, the hypothesis is supported by data and illustrated that relationship marketing strategy statistically mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. Furthermore, this research also proves that marketers who utilise all avenues of digital marketing strategies will be able to communicate and build a robust relationship with consumers, which leads to positive consumers' purchase decisions. In

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conclusion, digital marketing strategies with the interceding relationship marketing strategies can influence consumers to make a favourable purchase decision that benefits marketers, consumers, and the automotive industry in Malaysia.

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Keywords: digital marketing strategy, relationship marketing strategy, consumers' purchase decision, automotive industry

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, nine out of ten of the nation's 32.7 million consumers use the online platform to make their purchase decisions (DOSM, 2021). According to (Ganesan, 2021) 22 million Malaysians are digital consumers. Consumers in Malaysia have adopted the online channels compared to the offline channels with the dawn of the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital consumers have grown four times larger between 2020 and 2021 than in early 2019.

Moreover, an article published in the (New Straits Times, 2021) revealed that ninety percent of consumers in Malaysia had chosen digital means when purchasing products or services. Additionally, consumers in 2021 are spending more than eighty percent of their time browsing for products or services online and surfing at least seven websites before making a purchase decision (Ganesan, 2021). Besides, (Vasudevan & Arokiasamy, 2021) quoted that online shopping demand and the spending habits of digital consumers in Malaysia have amplified since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the movement control order was enforced. When the movement control order was withdrawn in many nations with stringent standard operating procedures, digital purchases became a new normal (Atto, 2021; Vasudevan & Arokiasamy, 2021). The rapid expansion of digital consumers has triggered many businesses to transform themselves into e-businesses. This is an opportunity for businesses to grow exponentially and become significant contributors to the digital economy (Kannan, 2017).

Previously consumers relied on brick-and-mortar automobile showrooms to view, experience, and make a purchase decision. However, currently, digital marketing has permitted the automotive industry players to improve consumer cognizance and has granted them a means to recognise consumers' expectations, consequently leading to consumers' purchase decisions (Pandey, 2021). For example, automobile manufacturers such as Chevrolet partnered with YouTube to update their products (Digital Marketing Institute, 2018). Likewise, Nissan used websites to boost its sales as a digital marketing strategy (Conversion Advantage, 2021).

Additionally, relationship marketing also plays a pivotal role in consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry (Gaurav, 2016). Based on research conducted by (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021), relationship marketing through digital

means is a significant strategy to build a robust and stable relationship with consumers, leading to consumer purchase decisions.

1.1 Background of the Automotive Industry in Malaysia

The automotive industry commenced in Malaysia when European carmakers began to produce completely knocked down automotive after Malaysia's independence on August 31st, 1957. In the mid-1960s, Japanese automotive manufacturers penetrated the Malaysian market through joint ventures with Malaysian-based firms. However, at that moment, Malaysia's domestic market was not large enough for the Japanese-Malaysian joint, automotive manufacturers to capitalize on economies of scale.

With the new look east policy promoted by the Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed in the 1980s, the Malaysian government-initiated import substitutions for the automotive industry. Most of the automotive industries in Malaysia in the 1980s were owned by foreign nationals and ethnic Chinese who were citizens of Malaysia. To boost the economic state of the Malays in Malaysia, the government took the initiative to introduce the National Car Project by incorporating the National Automobile Corporation Limited (PROTON) on May 7th, 1983. Thus, the Proton car was manufactured and introduced to consumers in Malaysia. Currently, there are approximately twenty-seven vehicle manufacturers established in Malaysia (MAI, 2021; Anazawa, 2021). Moreover, through the National Automotive Policy 2020 (NAP2020), the Malaysian government has undertaken steps to enhance the automotive industry utilizing the digital transformation policy (Nippon Express, 2020).

1.2 Research Problem Statement

Digital marketing strategy has caused radical transformations to the marketing activities in various industries in Malaysia (Kanapathipillai, 2021). Automotive manufacturers in Malaysia have substituted conventional transactional marketing approaches with a more contemporary marketing approach using cyberspace as a medium (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021). Currently, automotive industry marketers are eager to expand their sales through digital marketing using several digital platforms such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, mobile applications, emails, and blogs. Marketers intend to provide value and ease to consumers so that consumers can make a sound purchase decision (Cheng et al., 2011; Adjei et al., 2009; Armstrong and Kotler, 2009). Digital marketing and relationship marketing can bring the marketers and consumers of automobiles closer to a more innovative transaction in cyberspace. According to (Ali Nor et al., 2013), web-based platforms, a component of the digital marketing strategy by the marketers of the automotive industries in Malaysia, helped consumers recall brands which led to purchase decisions. On the contrary, some consumers perceived that web-based marketing has its disadvantages as well. According to (Goldsmith & Lafferty, 2008), consumers perceived that on-site or physical experience enhances consumer purchase decisions compared to the decision made through virtual experience.

Additionally, (Gupta, 2019) elucidated that digital marketing strategies strengthen consumer relationship marketing by gaining knowledge about consumers' behaviour through the product and service criticisms consumers provide. Similarly, (Tandon et al., 2020) mention that digital marketing facilitates companies to connect with consumers in real-time, thus building a relationship that leads to consumers' purchase decisions. Conversely, (Chaffey, 2021) discovered that digital marketing cannot precisely measure consumers' feelings but is only able to measure the visitors to a particular online site. Therefore, the relationship between the automotive industry marketers and the consumers could not be developed entirely, which results in consumers making less or no purchase.

According to (Ibojo & Dunmade, 2016), relationship marketing builds mutually satisfying relationships between marketers and consumers, stimulating consumer purchase decisions and satisfaction. Contrarily, (Gilaninia & Ghashlagh, 2012) established that sustaining relationships with some customers do not lead to consumer purchase decisions because the cost to create consumer relationship is more than the revenue yielded to convince consumers to make a purchase decision.

Furthermore, studies conducted by (Prasad & Garg, 2019) revealed that digital marketing strategies ensured that consumers could easily decipher the messages channeled by marketers, which leads to the consumers' purchase decision. On the other hand, (Khan & Islam, 2017) noted that the contents provided by marketers through digital marketing platforms do not ensure consumers' purchase decisions, but the added values provided by the marketers attract consumers to make a purchase decision.

Therefore, it is evident that a gap exists that need to be addressed to explore if the digital marketing strategy is significant for inducing consumer purchase decision in the automotive industry in Malaysia. It was also vital to investigate if relationship marketing strategy as an intervening factor encourages consumer purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. In order to narrow this gap, the following research questions and research objectives were put forward.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and relationship marketing strategy?

RQ2: Is there a statistically significant relationship between relationship marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions?

RQ3: Is there a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and the consumers' purchase decisions?

RQ4: Does relationship marketing strategy mediate the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions?

1.4 Research Objectives

RO1: To explore the significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and relationship marketing strategy.

RO2: To scrutinise the significant relationship between relationship marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions.

RO3: To study the significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions.

RO4: To investigate the mediating effect of relationship marketing strategy between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

The following sub-sections focus on the literature and hypothesis developed with regards to online learning, parent's support, and student's academic performance.

2.1 Literature Review

The following section provides the relevant literature that led to the development of the hypothesis statements.

2.1.1 Digital Marketing Strategy

Digital marketing strategy first emerged in the 1990s when the first search engine was introduced. Marketers were able to capitalize on it, and it became a contemporary method in the field of cyber marketing. Digital marketing strategy became a contemporary method of communication of cyber marketing, which impacted consumers through various interfaces, like search engines, emails, mobile apps, social media, and blogs. These created a better link between marketers and consumers (Garcia et al., 2019). Similarly, (Sawicki, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019) mentioned that digital marketing strategy utilizes electronic media platforms to create attentiveness, curiosity, and desire and increase consumers' purchase decisions. Digital marketing strategy has gained popularity since its introduction, and marketers have named it internet marketing, web-based marketing, e-social media marketing, and online marketing depending on its use (Sawicki, 2016).

2.1.2 Relationship Marketing Strategy

Traditional marketing concentrated on transactional marketing strategies to entice new consumers. Contemporary marketing is fixated on relationship marketing strategies to conserve and sustain consumers (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021; Wang & Head, 2005; Lindgreen, 2001; Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). As competition is mushrooming exponentially, marketers emphasize building relationships with their customers to enhance repeat purchases and consumer commitment and loyalty. The relationship marketing strategy is derived from services marketing and industrial marketing views. Dimensions such as interaction, conflict management, commitment, and trust are components of relationship marketing strategy (Ndubisi, 2007).

According to (Chukwu & Tom, 2020; Gaurav, 2016; Veinampy & Sivesan, 2012), relationship marketing strategy is the most prominent contemporary marketing strategy

that marketers could use to influence consumers' purchase decisions. A frequently quoted and most exemplary definition of relationship marketing strategy is provided by (Gronroos, 1994) as a strategy to recognise and institute, sustain and improve and when required to end relationships with consumers and stakeholders of a business, within an acceptable determining revenue, so that a win-win situation is always reached through mutually exchanging information and fulfilling promises.

2.1.3 Consumers' Purchase Decisions

A consumer is an entity comprising feelings, thoughts, sensations, and the ability to interconnect with others. An individual's decision to purchase a product or service is a learning process that the individual goes through, from problem recognition to post-purchase evaluation (Wharton et al., 2014; Blackwell et al., 2001). Consumer's purchase decision is demarcated as any undertakings straightforwardly related to acquiring, consuming, and discarding products and services (Blackwell et al., 2001). Based on the marketing perspective, consumers' purchase decisions are meeting consumers' expectations and enhancing their level of satisfaction every time (Porter, 1985). When making a purchase decision, consumers do it rationally using all information available to them through a thought process (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Consumers make a purchase decision by evaluating alternatives to avoid risks that they might encounter in the future (Chaipradernsak, 2007). Moreover, (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007) mention that consumers make a purchase decision based on their experience with the products or services. Therefore, consumers make a purchase decision based on various factors they process in their minds. Currently, a multitude of information is channeled to consumers by marketers using digital marketing strategies, and consumers process information such as price, quality, delivery, society, and culture, to name a few, before they close a deal.

2.1.4 Relationship Between Digital Marketing Strategy and Relationship Marketing Strategy

A contemporary marketing strategy used by online marketers to communicate and promote their products and services swiftly, efficiently, and at optimal cost is digital marketing. According to scholars (Le et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2020; García et al., 2019; Sawicki, 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012), the latest technology that influences customers through various channels of interaction, for example, the World Wide Web, Internet of Things (IoT), blockchain, Facebook, YouTube, emails, blogs, mobile apps, and social media enhances the relationship between marketers and consumers.

Additionally, (Zineldin, 2002) mentions that relationship marketing would not be an efficient strategy without digital marketing technology. Based on (Wang & Head, 2005), digital marketing acts as an interactive medium that allows relationship marketing to be implemented in the consumer market. Digital marketing is a modern communication and promotional tool used by retailers (Wang et al., 2002). Likewise (Gupta, 2019) mentions that digital marketing reinforces consumer relationship

marketing by learning about consumers' behaviour through the consumers' product and service reviews. Furthermore, digital marketing creates a personalized experience between marketers and consumers that enhances their relationships (Vinerean, 2017; Merisavo, 2003). In a similar perspective, (Tandon et al., 2020) cite that digital marketing enables marketers to communicate with consumers in real-time, thus building a relationship that increases consumer base and loyalty. Additionally, (Tuan & Moretti, 2013) discovered that social media marketing, a component of digital marketing strategy, plays a significant role in enhancing the relationship between sellers and buyers.

Besides, Digital marketing technique allows marketers to continuously and constantly engage with consumers in a two-way communication that enhances relationship building (Andzulis et al., 2012). Moreover, marketers highly perceive that digital marketing strategy enables them to implement relationship marketing activities at a reduced cost.

Contrarily, (Christensen, 1997) has found digital marketing using the World Wide Web to be a disruptive strategy that makes relationship marketing in a narrow sense possible in the consumer market by materialising certain circumstances to create relational consumer groups. According to (Chaffey, 2021) digital marketing cannot accurately measure consumers' sentiments but can only measure the number of visitors to a particular online marketing platform. Therefore, the relationship between the marketers and the consumers could not be thoroughly developed. In line with these conflicting findings, (Dastane, 2020) has recently discovered that digital marketing does not positively impact relationship marketing, which is a facet of customer relationship management. Thus, there exist gaps in the literature that need to be addressed, and this has led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumer relationship marketing.

2.1.5 Relationship Between Relationship Marketing Strategy and Consumers' Purchase Decision

The emphasis of contemporary marketing strategy is on relationship marketing strategy, according to (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021; Chukwu & Tom, 2020; Daqar & Smoudy, 2019; Saebnia et al., 2017; Velnampy and Sivesan, 2012; Christopher et al., 1991; Webster, 1992; Gummesson, 1994). The transition from traditional transactional marketing strategies to modern marketing strategies utilising relationship strategy to induce consumer purchase decisions has been the interest of several scholars (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021; Saebnia et al., 2017; Ibojo & Asabi, 2015; Ibojo, 2014; Gilaninia & Ghashlagh, 2012; Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003).

Additionally, relationship marketing creates mutually gratifying long-term relationships with an organisation's consumers, inducing consumer purchase decisions and satisfaction (Ibojo & Dunmade, 2016). In line with this (Zhang & Feng, 2009; Kotler & Keller, 2006) cited that the primary purpose of marketing is to build an in-depth, lasting

relationship with internal and external customers in organizations that would unequivocally impact purchase decisions and lead to organisational success. Furthermore, (Cheng et al., 2011; Adjei et al., 2009; Armstrong and Kotler, 2009; Liu, 2008) have found that relationship marketing increases perceived customer value, which steers to a final purchase decision ensues a lifetime value for the marketers.

In a similar perspective (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021; Chukwu & Tom, 2020; Daqar & Smoudy, 2019; Ranjbarian & Barari, 2009; Erabi & Izadi, 2005; Zeithamal & Bitner, 2003) elucidates that relationship marketing strategy concentrates on retaining and perfecting current customers in order to increase repeat purchase. Additionally, (Gilaninia et al., 2011; Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004) expressed that relationship marketing strategy is a method of establishing committed and loyal customers who would be satisfied with the firm's product or services and make an instant purchase decision. Furthermore, (Chukwu & Tom, 2020) has found that sellers who constantly build a relationship with consumers by giving prompt feedback, addressing complaints, and providing solutions to consumers can increase consumer purchase decisions.

Conversely, (Gilaninia & Ghashlagh, 2012) found that maintaining relationships with some customers results in valueless and futile efforts, which does not lead to a consumer purchase decision. Therefore, analysis conducted by (Gilaninia & Ghashlagh, 2012) revealed that consumer relationship marketing is not beneficial because the cost to preserve consumer relationships is more than the revenue generated to enhance consumer purchase decisions. Additionally, previous research (Zhang & Feng, 2009) found that relationship marketing strategy was essential for building consumer purchase decisions, but still, consumers switched to competitors' brands. Similarly, (Berry, 1995) declared that relationship marketing is an incompatible strategy because a transactional customer would most often make purchase decisions compared to contemporary customers in a relationship with the firm. Additionally, (Capella & Kinard, 2006) quoted that relationship marketing strategy yields positive results only when high switching costs exist for customers. In this instance, marketers and consumers have to spend significant efforts and resources to preserve their relationship, which leads to purchase decisions and revenue for the firm. A recent article (Lafleur, 2021) rationalises that relationship marketing strategy does not lead to immediate consumer purchase decisions but takes a long time as marketers need to build interactions. Additionally, relationship marketing does not always result in a positive consumer experience. Moreover, the objective of relationship marketing is to retain existing consumers and neglect new prospects (Lafleur, 2021). Thus, there exist gaps in the literature that need to be addressed, and this has led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between consumer relationship marketing and consumers' purchase decision.

2.1.6 Relationship Between Digital Marketing Strategy and Consumers' Purchase Decision

Several research scholars have indicated that digital marketing strategy, have unlocked the path for marketers to engage with consumers and to convince consumers to make a purchase decision (Kanapathipillai, 2021; Dar & Tariq, 2021; Jain & Pandey, 2020; Kleijnen et al., 2020; Prasad & Garg, 2019; Gawas et al., 2018; Krajnović et al., 2018; Nizam et al., 2018; Madhu & Verma, 2018; Chaffey & Smith, 2017; Reddy, 2017). According to (Kanapathipillai, 2021; Prasad & Garg, 2019), digital marketing strategies ensured that consumers could effortlessly decode the messages channeled by marketers, capturing consumers' attention, creating interest, and building the desire to make a purchase decision. Therefore, digital marketing strategies can generate a good relationship, retain and create committed and loyal customers who would repeat purchases (Kleijnen et al., 2020).

Moreover, a study conducted by (Sashi, 2012) discovered that digital marketing strategies resulted in a two-way engagement between the marketers and consumers. This positively affected the relationship between digital marketing strategy and the consumers' purchase decision which eventually led to a higher probability of purchase decision. Likewise, (Krajnovic et al., 2018) analysed the association of digital marketing, consumers' emotions, product familiarity, and risk assessment with consumers' purchase decisions. The researchers discovered that all these factors positively correlated with consumers' purchase decisions, and digital marketing strategy also acted as a two-way communication tool to induce consumers' purchase decisions. Based on a study conducted by (Ali Nor et al., 2013), web-based platforms, an element of digital marketing strategy used in the automotive industries in Malaysia, found that it helped consumers recall brands which led to purchase decisions. On the contrary, some consumers perceived that web-based marketing has its disadvantages as well. Consumers perceived that physical experience increases the chances of consumer purchase decisions compared to a decision made through cyber experience (Goldsmith & Lafferty, 2008).

Another research (Prasad & Garg, 2019) enlightened that electronic word-of-mouth, a means of digital marketing strategy, increases consumers' probability of making a purchase decision. Similarly, research conducted by (Kanapathipillai, 2021; Khatib, 2016) enlightened that social media platforms such as Facebook, which is a significant part of digital marketing strategy, highly contribute to the consumers' purchase decisions. Social media platforms allow consumers to gain the necessary information to make their purchase decision. Furthermore, a study conducted by (Mahalaxmi & Ranjith, 2016) verified that consumers gave extreme importance to digital marketing because digital marketing enabled them to easily communicate and transact with online retailers compared to traditional brick-and-mortar stores. Consumers found that they could effortlessly make a purchase decision with just a click on their computer. In a similar perspective, (Dahiya & Gayatri, 2017) disclosed that when making a purchase decision on a car, consumers used the websites, a component of digital marketing strategy.

Consumers preferred the websites created by car manufacturers to make a purchase decision.

Conversely, a study conducted by (Meslat, 2018) exposed that digital marketing strategy does not apply to all consumers' purchase decisions. The researcher indicated that older consumers have little or no knowledge of digital marketing methods and become skeptical when making an online purchase decision. Another contradicting finding was presented by (Khan & Islam, 2017). Their study implied that the contents in the social media platform do not lead to consumers' purchase decisions but the added values provided by the marketers of a firm.

Therefore, (Khan & Islam, 2017) has shown that digital marketing does not always attract consumers when making a purchase decision. Thus, there exist gaps in the literature that need to be addressed, and this has led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H3: There is a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decision.

2.1.7 The Mediating Effect of Relationship Marketing Strategy Between Digital Marketing Strategy and Consumers' Purchase Decision

Digital marketing plays an essential role in consumers' purchase decisions (Kanapathipillai, 2021; Dar & Tariq, 2021; Jain & Pandey, 2020; Kleijnen et al., 2020; Prasad & Garg, 2019) and also helps build a two-way communication between marketers and consumers (Le et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2020; García et al., 2019). Thus, creating a good relationship between the seller and the buyer, which in turn leads to consumers' purchase decisions (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021; Chukwu & Tom, 2020; Daqar & Smoudy, 2019; Toor & Husnain, 2017).

Based on research conducted by (Abbasi, 2015) relationship marketing plays a mediating role through social media, which is an element of digital marketing that has a significant impact on consumers' gratitude after they make a purchase decision. Likewise, (Huang, 2015) implied that relationship marketing is a mediating factor between digital marketing strategy through the electronic post and consumers' loyalty, which significantly creates repeated consumer purchase decisions.

Additionally, (Ang, 2011; Siano et al., 2005) mentioned that relationship marketing plays a pivotal role between a wide array of digital marketing technologies used by marketers to create value, leading to a consumer purchase decision. Furthermore, (Payne & Frow, 2005) insinuated that relationship marketing acts as an arbitrating strategy between marketing communication technologies (digital marketing) applied by marketers and creating value for all stakeholders of a firm. Consequently, consumers seek value from the products or services offered by marketers, encouraging purchase decisions.

On the contrary, (Karjaluocto & Ulkuniemi, 2015) discovered that relationship marketing strategy does not affect the relationship between marketers and consumers.

Therefore, consumers do not make a purchase decision easily when dealing with companies that have transformed from traditional transactional marketing to contemporary online marketing. Thus, there exist gaps in the literature that need to be addressed, and this has led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H4: Relationship marketing strategy mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decision.

2.2 Proposed Conceptual Framework

This study aims to analyse the mediating impact of relationship marketing strategy on the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. Figure 1 expresses the proposed conceptual Framework formed to illustrate the relationship between the variables of this study.

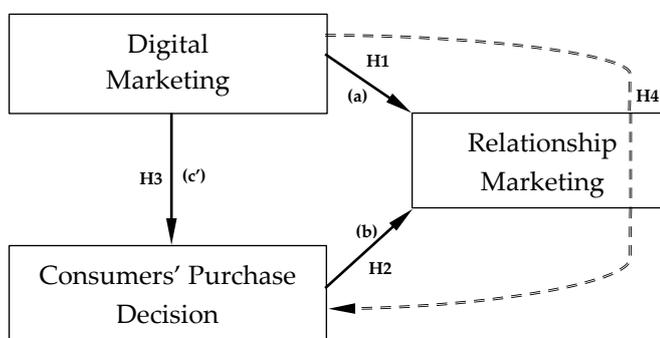


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

This research aims to examine the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions with relationship marketing strategy as the intervening variable. A total of 650 self-administered survey questionnaires were distributed among marketers in the automotive industry in Malaysia. The questionnaires utilised Likert's 5-points scale varying from "Strongly disagree (1)" to "Strongly agree (5)". The survey instrument is comprised of four sections. The first section intended to obtain data about the marketers' demographic profile, the second section generated data on digital marketing strategy. The third section produced data on relationship marketing strategy. Finally, the fourth section provided data on the consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia.

To acquire data on the independent variable (digital marketing strategy), which is the 5-point Likert's scale, was established on literature and adapted from (Jain & Pandey, 2020; Kleijnen et al., 2020; Prasad & Garg, 2019; Godwin, 2019; Gawas et al., 2018). It consists of 5 items. Next, to attain data on the mediating variable (relationship marketing strategy), the questions were grounded on literature adapted from (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021; Saebnia et al., 2017). The measure included 5 items. To assess the

dependent variable (consumers' purchase decision), the questions were built on literature and adapted from (Le et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2020; Hasan, 2020; García et al., 2019). The measure contained 5 items. The demographic profile encompassed 5 items to discover the profile of the marketers who participated in this study.

To test the instrument's reliability that was utilised to harvest the data for this research, Cronbach's Alpha was examined. The α values were between 0.7 and 0.8, indicating that the instrument's internal consistency was good. Table 1 shows the reliability of the instrument used in this study.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
Digital marketing	0.826	5
Relationship marketing	0.816	5
Consumers' purchase decision	0.864	5

3.1 Population, Sampling and Measurements

The population of this research comprises Malaysian citizens who are marketers of the automotive industry in Malaysia. The total workforce in the automotive industry in Malaysia is 709,457 (MAI, 2021). The (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) population and sample size tabulation offer a suitable sample size for this research from the population. Based on (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) tabulation, the value of $\alpha = 0.05$, and the degree of accuracy is 0.05. Subsequently, no calculations were required when deciding the sample size for this research. Based on (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) formulation, the adequate sample size is 384 as the population employed in the automotive in Malaysia is 709,457. Therefore, a sample size of 650 was regarded as a fit for this research by the researchers.

This research was performed using the simple random sampling technique. The respondents willingly contributed to the survey without any persuasion. A total of 650 questionnaires were forwarded to the automotive industry marketers through social media platforms. A total of 628 questionnaires were amassed, which is approximately a 96.6 percent rate of return. During systematisation, it was identified that 23 out of 628 questionnaires returned were incomplete. Therefore, a total of 605 questionnaires furnished the data for this research.

Factor Analysis was conducted, which illuminates the structure of associations within the group of items. To investigate the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, which delivered the association between variables, SPSS version 26 was employed. Moreover, a series of regression analyses were conducted using Jamovi (Version 2.0) (The Jamovi Project, 2021) to examine the mediation effect, hypothesis, and path estimates. Additionally, the Hayes Process Macro Version 3.5 (Model Number: 4) was used to verify the indirect effect between the independent and dependent variables via the mediating variable (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020).

4. Findings and Interpretation

The following section provides the findings of this study, including the respondents' demographic profiles, factor analysis, descriptive analysis, correlation, and regression analysis.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Parents

The profile of the respondents studied is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Marketers (N=605)

Demographics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	384	63.5
	Female	221	36.5
Age	25 – 30	241	39.8
	35 – 40	197	32.6
	45 – 50	85	14.0
	55 – 60	82	13.6
Position	Senior Marketing Manager	51	8.4
	Marketing Manager	63	10.4
	Assistant Marketing Manager	136	22.6
	Marketing Executive	183	30.2
	Junior Marketing Executive	172	28.4
Academic Qualification	Primary	0	0
	Secondary	98	16.2
	Diploma	214	35.4
	Undergraduate degree	241	39.8
	Post-Graduate degree	52	8.6
Years of Experience	1 – 5	103	17.0
	6 – 10	261	43.1
	11 – 15	193	31.9
	>15	48	8.0

The demographic profile of the marketers surveyed in this research is shown in Table 2. The survey exhibits that the majority of marketers in the automotive industry were males (63.5%). In terms of age, the majority were between (25-30) years old, which is (39.8%). A majority of (30.2%) marketers in the automotive industry surveyed are Marketing Executives. In terms of academic qualification, a majority of 241 or 39.8% of the marketers have attained an undergraduate degree. Finally, A majority of (43.1%) of the marketers have gained (6-10) years of experience in the automotive industry.

4.2 Factor Analysis

Table 3 Factor Analysis shows the principal variables that explain the framework of associations within the group of variables. Table 3 displays the factors, the items, and the factor loading of each item used in this study. Five factor loadings were greater than 0.8.

Seven factors loaded between 0.7 and 0.8, and three factors loaded between 0.6 and 0.7. Therefore, it can be deduced that the factor loadings were adequate in this research.

Table 3: Factor Analysis (N=605)

Factor ID	Factors & Items	Factor Loading
DM	Digital Marketing	
DM1	Digital marketing strategy used by my company helps consumers to easily compare between the automobile variants and models.	0.739
DM2	Digital marketing strategy allows unceasing interaction between the customer and myself and thus stimulates my customers' purchase decisions.	0.695
DM3	Digital marketing strategy has an impending impact on my customer's behaviour.	0.715
DM4	Digital marketing strategy offers adequate information to my customers about the automobiles sold by my company.	0.842
DM5	Digital marketing strategy enables improved consumer purchase decision making.	0.774
RM	Relationship Marketing	
RM1	Relationship marketing strategy increases consumers' trust in our products and services before making a purchase decision.	0.857
RM2	Relationship marketing strategy enhances consumers' commitment towards our products and services before making a purchase decision.	0.769
RM3	Relationship marketing strategy enables consumers to easily communicate with the marketers before making a purchase decision.	0.693
RM4	Relationship marketing strategy helps marketers and consumers to resolve conflicts before making a purchase decision.	0.859
RM5	Relationship marketing strategy makes marketers competent when handling consumers and thus increases consumers' confidence.	0.773
CD	Consumers' Purchase Decision	
CD1	I needed only a short amount of time communicating with the consumers before the consumers are convinced and decide to make a purchase.	0.768
CD2	My customers also gathered information through digital marketing platforms before making their purchase decision.	0.810
CD3	My customers spend a lot of time visiting various automobile showrooms before making a purchase decision.	0.685
CD4	My customers also relied on offline advertisements before making a purchase decision.	0.816
CD5	The relationship that I build with my consumers leads to their final purchase decisions.	0.761

4.3 Mean, Standard Deviation and Normality Analysis

The descriptive statistics in Table 4 shows the mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness and kurtosis values of this study.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics (N=605)

Factors	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis	Min	Max
Digital Marketing Strategy	2.23	0.627	0.742	0.965	1.0	5.0
Relationship Marketing Strategy	2.36	0.667	0.505	0.994	1.0	5.0
Consumers' Purchase Decision	2.42	0.656	0.265	0.825	1.0	5.0

From Table 4, the consumers' purchase decision indicates the highest mean value of 2.42 ± 0.656. The lowest mean value is digital marketing strategy, 2.23 ± 0.627. The normality test indicates that the skewness and kurtosis values have a threshold of ±2 which means that the data are distributed normal as clarified by (Chinna & Yuen, 2015; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2014).

4.4 Correlation Analysis

To study how the variables are correlated, the correlation analysis is shown in Table 5: Correlation Matrix.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix (N=605)

Factors	DM	RM	CD
Digital marketing strategy (DM)	1		
Relationship marketing strategy (RM)	0.755**	1	
Consumers' purchase decision (CD)	0.783**	0.751**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Based on the correlation matrix shown in Table 5, it was observed that the data significantly supported the measurement model. The correlation matrix recorded that the variable digital marketing strategy strongly correlated with the variable relationship marketing strategy ($r = 0.755$; $p < 0.001$) and strongly correlated with consumers' purchase decision ($r = 0.783$; $p < 0.001$). The variable relationship marketing strategy strongly correlated with the variable consumers' purchase decision ($r = 0.751$; $p < 0.001$).

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a strong positive association between the variable digital marketing strategy and both the variables relationship marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decision. Additionally, there is also a strong positive association between relationship marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions.

4.5 Mediation Analysis

To investigate the mediation analysis a series of regression analysis was performed using Jamovi (Version 2.0) (The Jamovi Project, 2021).

Table 6: Mediation Effect

Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	p	% Mediation	LLCI	ULCI
Indirect (a*b)	0.294	0.0513	5.73	< 0.001	35.9%	0.201	0.396
Direct (c)	0.525	0.0571	9.20	< 0.001	64.1%	0.412	0.638
Total (c+a*b)	0.819	0.0316	25.93	< 0.001	100%	0.754	0.880

Table 7: Path Effect

Variable	Path	Variable	Estimate	SE	Z	p
DM	(a) --->	RM	0.804	0.0363	22.13	< 0.001
RM	(b) --->	CD	0.365	0.0597	6.12	< 0.001
DM	(c') --->	CD	0.525	0.0571	9.20	< 0.001

Table 8: Hayes Process Macro-Indirect Effect of Digital Marketing Strategy on Consumers' Purchase Decision via Relationship Marketing Strategy

Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
0.294	0.0636	0.1743	0.4230

Table 6: Mediation Effect, illuminates the results for total effects that digital marketing strategy positively predicts consumers' purchase decision ($c+a*b=0.819$, $Z=25.93$, $p < 0.001$). Analysing the indirect effects, the result unveils that relationship marketing strategy significantly mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions ($a*b=0.294$, $Z=5.73$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, this signifies that relationship marketing strategy is a statistically significant mediator between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions.

Additionally, by utilising Hayes Process Macro, Model number=4 (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020) verifies the outcome of the mediating effect, which is illustrated in Table 8: Hayes Process Macro. The indirect effect of digital marketing strategy on consumers' purchase decision via relationship marketing strategy indicates that the bootstrap lower level confidence interval (LLCI=0.1743) and the upper-level confidence interval (ULCI=0.4230) are both positive. Therefore, the value zero does not drop between the LLCI and ULCI, indicating that the relationship marketing strategy is an intervening factor between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions.

Thus, it can be conjectured that relationship marketing strategy significantly mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. Therefore, it can be deduced that the statistical data significantly supported the proposed hypothesis H4.

Based on Table 7: Path Effect for (path a) exhibited in Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework, digital marketing strategy positively affects relationship marketing strategy ($B=0.804$, $Z=22.13$, $p < 0.001$). Consequently, hypothesis H1 proposed in this research is supported by statistical data. Path estimate for (path b) exhibited in Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework, relationship marketing strategy, in turn, positively affects consumers' purchase decision ($B=0.365$, $Z=6.12$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the proposed hypothesis H2 is supported by statistical data.

Additionally, the outcome implies that even after accounting for the mediating effect of relationship marketing strategy, digital marketing strategy still positively impacts the consumers' purchase decision, indicated as path c' in Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework ($B=0.525$, $Z=9.20$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, the mediating effect of relationship marketing strategy accounts for 35.9% of the total effect between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decision, as exhibited in Table 6: Mediation

Estimates and Table 7: Path Effect. Therefore, it can be deduced that the proposed hypothesis H3 is supported by statistical data.

Finally, through these statistical inferences, it can be proven that relationship marketing strategy significantly and statistically mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia.

5. Discussion

This study focused on the mediating effect of relationship marketing strategy between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. The responses from 605 respondents generated the data for this study.

Firstly, this study unveiled a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and relationship marketing strategy in the automotive industry in Malaysia, supporting hypothesis H1. The results of this study can be supported by previous research (Le et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2020; García et al., 2019; Gupta, 2019) who found that digital marketing strategy acts as a conversing avenue that lets relationship marketing to be executed in the consumer market. Additionally, (Andzulis et al., 2012) revealed that digital marketing techniques allow marketers to be uninterrupted and persistently involved with consumers in a two-way interaction that augments relationship building at a meager cost. Besides, this study can overturn the findings of (Chaffey, 2021; Dastane, 2020; Christensen, 1997), who found that digital marketing is a disruptive strategy that negatively impacts relationship marketing and does not quantify consumers' sentiments. Although digital marketing will not enhance the relationship with all consumers, the automotive industry marketers in Malaysia have indicated that digital marketing has provided a means of better understanding and communicating with consumers, eventually leading to a better relationship. Thus, the findings of this research have answered the first research question and have narrowed the gap in the literature.

Secondly, this study revealed a statistically significant relationship between relationship marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions, supporting hypothesis H2. The results of this research corroborate the findings of previous researchers such as (Kanapathipillai & Mahbob, 2021; Chukwu & Tom, 2020; Daqar & Smoudy, 2019), who elucidated that relationship marketing strategy converges on perfecting and preserving existing consumers to make repeated purchasing decisions and also creating dedicated and devoted consumers who would make an instant purchase decision. Additionally, the findings of this study negate the findings of (Lafleur, 2021; Gilaninia & Ghashlagh, 2012; Zhang & Feng, 2009), who stated that relationships with some customers result in a waste of time and effort, which does not increase consumer purchase decision. Moreover, these researchers mention that a relationship marketing strategy takes a long time to build, and it does not always end up in a positive consumer experience. This study strongly signifies that the marketers of the automotive

industry in Malaysia view relationship marketing strategy as a constructive strategy to build a relationship with consumers and create a positive consumers' purchase decision. Thus, the findings of this research have answered the second research question and have narrowed the gap in the literature.

Thirdly, this research has verified a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions, supporting hypothesis H3. This research result is parallel to the findings of previous scholars (Kanapathipillai, 2021; Dar & Tariq, 2021; Jain & Pandey, 2020; Kleijnen et al., 2020), who found that digital marketing strategy eases the communication between marketers and consumers, thus leading to a consumer purchase decision. Therefore, this confirms that digital marketing strategies enable consumers to easily decipher the information provided by marketers, leading to purchase decisions parallel to the findings of (Kanapathipillai, 2021; Prasad & Garg, 2019). Likewise, (Kleijnen et al., 2020) mentions that digital marketing strategies can foster a good relationship, creating loyal consumers who would repeat purchases. Additionally, the findings of this research repudiate the findings of (Meslat, 2018) who claimed that digital marketing strategy does not apply to older consumers as they lack the knowledge of digital marketing techniques and may have doubts when making a purchase decision. Moreover, the views of (Khan & Islam, 2017), who mentioned that digital marketing strategies do not entice consumers, can be rejected based on the findings of this research. Thus, the findings of this research have answered the third research question and have narrowed the gap in the literature.

Finally, this study also concentrated on the mediating role of relationship marketing strategy between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions. It was evident that relationship marketing strategy has a mediating effect between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions, supporting hypothesis H4. These findings validate and parallel to previous scholars (Abbasi, 2015; Huang, 2015; Ang, 2011; Siano et al., 2005; Payne & Frow, 2005) who found that relationship marketing plays a mediating role through the use of various types of digital marketing strategies which has a significant impact on consumers' purchase decision. Moreover, this research also invalidates the findings of (Karjaluo & Ulkuniemi, 2015), who asserted that relationship marketing strategy does not influence the relationship between marketers and consumers. Therefore, consumers do not make a purchase decision easily when dealing with companies that utilise digital marketing techniques. Thus, the findings of this research have answered the fourth research question and have narrowed the gap in the literature.

6. Conclusion and Managerial Implications

This research was designed and performed to demonstrate if relationship marketing strategy mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. Based on the outcome, it can be inferred that all the objectives of this research were attained, and the gaps emphasised

in the literature were bridged. The researchers have exposed that digital marketing strategy has a statistically significant influence on the relationship marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. Therefore, this study is in line with the findings of previous scholars (Le et al., 2021; Dar & Tariq, 2021; Kanapathipillai, 2021; Tandon et al., 2020; Jain & Pandey, 2020; Kleijnen et al., 2020; Gupta, 2019; García et al., 2019; Sawicki, 2016) who have also proven the significance of digital marketing strategy in fostering superior relationship with consumers which will stimulate positive consumers' purchase decision.

Moreover, this research also demonstrates that digital marketing strategies implemented by the automotive firms would not strengthen consumers' purchase decisions without the intervention of relationship marketing strategies adopted by the marketers in the automotive firms. This is parallel to the studies conducted by (Abbasi, 2015; Huang, 2015; Ang, 2011; Siano et al., 2005; Payne & Frow, 2005), who have discovered that relationship marketing plays a significant mediating role between various digital marketing strategies which eventually has a substantial impact on consumers' purchase decision.

Moreover, the managerial implication is to ensure that marketers of the automotive industry utilise all avenues of digital marketing strategies, which will unlock new opportunities to interact with prospective and existing consumers to build an everlasting relationship. The powerful relationship forged between marketers and consumers will lead to positive purchasing decisions.

Finally, this research has enlightened the significance of digital marketing strategy and relationship marketing strategy in creating confidence in consumers when they make a purchase decision in the automotive industry in Malaysia.

Additionally, the accompanying literature will add value to all marketers and owners of the automotive companies and scholars in terms of the shreds of evidence and facts as to why a digital marketing strategy is significant in attracting and convincing consumers to make a purchase decision. Therefore, this research is significant because it will build positive social change within Malaysia's automotive industry and other manufacturing sectors.

7. Limitations and Further Research

The focus of this study was on the mediating role of relationship marketing strategy between digital marketing strategy and consumers' purchase decisions in the automotive industry in Malaysia. This research was only conducted in the automotive industries operating in West Malaysia. Subsequently, to acquire further knowledge on this mediation research, analysis can be conducted in East Malaysia, and also a comparison study can be undertaken on the automotive industry between neighbouring ASEAN countries.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this research would like to proclaim that there are no conflicts of interest linked with this research, and this research was not subsidised by anyone that could have manipulated its results. As the researchers of this study, the authors validate its novelty, emphasise that this study has not been published previously, and verify that it is not presently intended for publication elsewhere.

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The authors are academicians and researchers who have been involved in scholarly and research activities for over two decades.

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