

## Augmented Reality in E-Commerce: A Conceptual Exploration of Product Uncertainty and Customer Engagement

Hari Setiabudi Husni<sup>1\*</sup>, Michelle Alicia Lynch<sup>2</sup>, William Leo Walangitan<sup>3</sup>,  
Aaron Kennedy<sup>4</sup>

\*School Of Information Systems, Binus University, Jakarta, Indonesia,

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### Corresponding author\*:

[hari.setiabudi@binus.ac.id](mailto:hari.setiabudi@binus.ac.id)

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**Abstract:** The growth of e-commerce has redefined consumer expectations, yet it continues to grapple with key limitations such as product uncertainty and insufficient customer engagement. Augmented Reality (AR) has emerged as a promising technological innovation, offering immersive product visualization that enhances consumer interaction and confidence in online shopping. This study provides a conceptual exploration of AR's role in mitigating product-related uncertainty while simultaneously promoting deeper customer engagement within e-commerce platforms. Employing a systematic literature-based approach, the study synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed research across marketing, human-computer interaction, and information systems. The analysis identifies how AR reduces different dimensions of uncertainty—such as appearance, fit, and functional ambiguity—and outlines the psychological mechanisms, including trust formation and perceived interactivity, that mediate user responses. Furthermore, the study highlights the conditions under which AR fosters cognitive and emotional engagement, with implications for interface design and strategic technology adoption. This conceptual synthesis offers both theoretical insights and practical guidelines for e-commerce platforms considering AR integration. It also proposes a research agenda to empirically validate the conceptual model and expand understanding of AR's long-term impact on consumer behavior.

**Keywords:** Augmented Reality; Product Uncertainty; Customer Engagement; E-Commerce; Conceptual Framework; Immersive Technology; Trust; Literature Review

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of digital commerce has profoundly reshaped consumer behavior, expectations, and modes of interaction. As online retail channels become more ubiquitous, a persistent challenge remains: the difficulty of simulating tangible product experiences that are central to traditional, in-person shopping (Poushneh & Vasquez-Parraga, 2017). This challenge is particularly evident in product categories where visual, spatial, or tactile evaluation is critical—such as fashion, furniture, and cosmetics (Javornik, 2016). Consumers navigating these limitations often encounter product uncertainty, which refers

to their inability to fully assess the attributes, fit, or functional performance of an item before purchase (Lou & Xie, 2009).

Product uncertainty can negatively affect decision confidence, trust, and post-purchase satisfaction, ultimately increasing the likelihood of product returns and customer attrition (Kim & Forsythe, 2008; Flavián et al., 2019). In response, e-commerce platforms are increasingly adopting emerging technologies to enhance consumer experience and engagement. Among these, Augmented Reality (AR) has gained considerable attention for its ability to overlay virtual product representations onto real-world environments via smartphones or AR-enabled devices (Pantano & Pizzi, 2020). AR's immersive features can simulate tactile interaction, enable spatial visualization, and personalize experiences—making it a potent tool for mitigating product uncertainty (Verhagen et al., 2019; Kim & Forsythe, 2008).

Several empirical studies have suggested that AR technology enhances perceived diagnosticity, interactivity, and enjoyment, which in turn influence satisfaction and behavioral intention (Hilken et al., 2017; De Ruyter et al., 2020). Additionally, AR fosters deeper customer engagement—defined as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment a consumer makes in a brand or shopping experience (Brodie et al., 2011). This aligns with frameworks such as Flow Theory and Media Richness Theory, which highlight the role of immersive and information-rich environments in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Despite growing interest, existing studies often adopt fragmented perspectives—either focusing solely on technological affordances or isolating user responses without an integrative framework. Furthermore, while numerous studies have examined AR's usability or hedonic value, fewer have mapped its utility in addressing the core challenge of product uncertainty and its downstream effect on engagement. There remains a research gap in holistically understanding how AR features reduce uncertainty and enhance engagement across multiple dimensions.

To address this gap, this study develops a conceptual framework based on a systematic review of current AR and e-commerce literature. By thematically synthesizing findings from multidisciplinary sources, this research aims to identify: (1) the key features of AR that influence customer perception; (2) the mechanisms through which AR reduces product uncertainty; and (3) the psychological mediators and outcomes that link AR use to customer engagement. This study contributes to theory by unifying scattered constructs within a

coherent model and provides practical insights for AR integration in digital retail environments.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Product Uncertainty in E-Commerce**

Product uncertainty refers to the consumer's lack of complete information about a product's attributes, functionality, or suitability prior to purchase (Lou & Xie, 2009; Kim & Forsythe, 2008). It is especially prevalent in e-commerce, where the absence of physical inspection creates asymmetries in product perception. Scholars typically divide product uncertainty into three dimensions:

- **Attribute uncertainty:** Occurs when consumers cannot confirm physical characteristics (e.g., color, material) (Flavián et al., 2019).
- **Fit uncertainty:** Related to concerns over compatibility or sizing, especially relevant in apparel and furniture (Pantano & Pizzi, 2020).
- **Functional uncertainty:** Arises from doubts about performance, durability, or usability (Verhagen et al., 2019).

These uncertainties can deter purchase decisions, lower satisfaction, and increase return rates (Kim & Forsythe, 2008).

### **Augmented Reality and Customer Experience**

Augmented Reality provides interactive, real-time overlays of digital content onto physical environments. In e-commerce, AR enables users to visualize how a product will look or function within a specific context (Pantano & Pizzi, 2020; Hilken et al., 2017). Research shows that AR can improve perceived product informativeness and diagnosticity, reduce uncertainty, and enhance decision confidence (De Ruyter et al., 2020; Brodie et al., 2011). Notably, the “virtual try-on” feature has been particularly impactful in categories like eyewear, cosmetics, and home decor (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

In theoretical terms, AR's contribution aligns with the Media Richness Theory (MRT), which posits that media capable of transmitting rich, interactive cues facilitate better understanding and trust (Daft & Lengel, 1986). It also intersects with the Flow Theory, suggesting that immersive experiences can heighten concentration and satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

## Customer Engagement in E-Commerce

Customer engagement encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in a digital platform or brand (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). It is an important metric for loyalty and long-term value. AR is theorized to influence engagement through several pathways:

- Cognitive engagement: Users process more information due to higher interactivity (Hollebeek, 2011).
- Emotional engagement: Users experience enjoyment and trust through immersion (Vivek et al., 2012).
- Behavioral engagement: Users are more likely to interact, share, or purchase (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

Research highlights that AR's role in enhancing engagement is mediated by psychological factors like trust, perceived control, and novelty appeal (De Ruyter et al., 2020; Scholz & Smith, 2016).

## Research Gap and Objective

While several studies examine AR's impact on user satisfaction or usability, relatively few address its role in mitigating product uncertainty and enhancing holistic customer engagement. Moreover, many prior works lack a unifying framework to explain how technological features translate into customer outcomes. This study aims to fill that gap by proposing a conceptual model that links AR's affordances to uncertainty reduction, psychological mediation, and engagement outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual research design grounded in secondary data. A systematic literature review (SLR) methodology was employed to collect, screen, and synthesize peer-reviewed articles that examine the relationship between Augmented Reality, product uncertainty, and customer engagement in digital commerce. The aim was to develop a conceptual framework that integrates fragmented insights into a coherent theoretical model

## Literature Search Strategy

A structured search was conducted across major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in various combinations

included: "Augmented Reality," "AR in e-commerce," "product uncertainty," "virtual try-on," "customer engagement," and "online shopping." Only articles published between 2015 and 2024 were included to ensure relevance and recency.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles or conference papers
- Written in English
- Focus on AR applications in online retail or digital commerce
- Address at least one of the core constructs: product uncertainty or customer engagement

Articles were excluded if they:

- Focused solely on Virtual Reality (VR) or other unrelated technologies
- Lacked empirical or theoretical grounding
- Were technical papers not oriented toward consumer behavior

### **Data Extraction and Synthesis**

From the initial pool of 130 articles, 60 met the inclusion criteria. The selected papers were subjected to thematic coding using NVivo software. Core concepts, constructs, and relational pathways were extracted and organized under predefined themes. These themes were then used to construct a conceptual model, consistent with conceptual research best practices (MacInnis, 2011).

### **Limitations of the Methodology**

While a systematic and rigorous approach was used, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources. The absence of primary empirical data constrains the ability to test hypotheses or validate relationships. However, the conceptual model provides a solid foundation for future empirical testing and theoretical refinement.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***Thematic Synthesis of Reviewed Literature***

Through thematic coding of 60 high-quality studies, three dominant themes emerged that informed the construction of the conceptual framework: (1) the dimensions of product

uncertainty; (2) the experiential features of AR technology; and (3) the forms and drivers of customer engagement in e-commerce.

1. **Product Uncertainty in E-Commerce:** Product uncertainty is consistently highlighted as a critical barrier in online shopping, particularly due to the absence of tactile interaction and physical inspection (Lou & Xie, 2009; Kim & Forsythe, 2008). The literature clusters this uncertainty into three sub-dimensions:
  - Attribute Uncertainty: Inability to assess physical features such as color, size, and texture (Flavián et al., 2019).
  - Fit Uncertainty: Difficulty in predicting product suitability, especially for wearable or customizable items (Pantano & Pizzi, 2020).
  - Functional Uncertainty: Doubts about product performance, durability, or compatibility (Verhagen et al., 2019).
  
2. **Augmented Reality Features:** AR mitigates these uncertainties through enhanced visual and spatial information. Dominant features include:
  - Visual Realism: High-fidelity rendering that simulates real-world interaction (De Ruyter et al., 2020).
  - Interactivity: Ability to manipulate, rotate, and zoom products in real-time (Brodie et al., 2011).
  - Contextualization: Overlay of products in real environments (e.g., room visualization or body try-on) (Daft & Lengel, 1986).
  - Personalization: Customized simulations based on user data or preferences (Scholz & Smith, 2016).
  
3. **Customer Engagement Dimensions:** Engagement is conceptualized in a tripartite model (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011):
  - Cognitive Engagement: Mental attention and information processing (Hollebeek, 2011).
  - Emotional Engagement: Affective responses such as enjoyment or trust (Vivek et al., 2012).
  - Behavioral Engagement: Active participation, including clicks, shares, and purchases (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

These themes were mapped to understand how AR bridges the gap between uncertainty and engagement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The resulting conceptual framework is structured around an input-process-output model:

- Input: AR technology features (visual realism, interactivity, contextualization, personalization).
- Process: Reduction in product uncertainty across attribute, fit, and functional domains.
- Mediators: Psychological responses (trust, perceived control, immersion).
- Output: Enhanced customer engagement in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions.

The framework posits that the more immersive and interactive the AR experience, the greater the reduction in perceived product uncertainty, thereby fostering higher levels of engagement. This model aligns with existing theories such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989), Media Richness Theory (MRT) (Daft & Lengel, 1986), and Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), which emphasize the role of interactivity and information quality in shaping user attitudes and behaviors.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This conceptual framework offers several implications:

1. For Researchers: The model provides a basis for hypothesis development and empirical testing using structural equation modeling or experimental design (MacInnis, 2011).
2. For Practitioners: E-commerce platforms can use this framework to prioritize AR features that directly impact customer trust and engagement (Pantano & Pizzi, 2020; Hilken et al., 2017).
3. For Designers: UI/UX professionals can apply insights from fit and attribute uncertainty reduction to enhance virtual try-on interfaces or spatial visualization tools (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Scholz & Smith, 2016).

Directions for Future Research Several avenues are open for expanding this conceptual work: • Empirical validation across product categories (fashion, electronics, furniture) (MacInnis, 2011). • Cultural and demographic segmentation to assess engagement differentials (Kim & Forsythe, 2008). • Integration with AI for adaptive personalization in AR systems (Scholz & Smith, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

The integration of Augmented Reality (AR) into e-commerce represents a transformative shift in how consumers interact with digital products, especially in mitigating longstanding issues related to product uncertainty. This study synthesized insights from recent literature to construct a conceptual framework that illustrates the mechanisms through which AR features—such as visual realism, interactivity, contextualization, and personalization—contribute to reducing product-related ambiguity. These reductions in uncertainty, in turn, activate key psychological mediators such as trust, perceived control, and immersive experience, which lead to elevated levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement among consumers.

The model presented is not merely theoretical; it offers a strategic foundation for AR implementation in digital commerce environments. By clearly mapping the relationships between technological affordances and customer-centric outcomes, the framework enables platform developers, marketing strategists, and user experience designers to make evidence-informed decisions about AR integration. It also provides a lens through which future researchers can operationalize variables, formulate hypotheses, and empirically test AR's effectiveness across various product domains and consumer segments.

Nevertheless, this study remains conceptual in nature and relies solely on secondary data. Future work is encouraged to empirically validate the proposed model using quantitative methods such as Structural Equation Modeling or experimental approaches. Moreover, cross-cultural comparisons and industry-specific investigations will enhance the generalizability of findings.

In conclusion, Augmented Reality is not just an embellishment to online retail—it is a strategic enabler that can enhance trust, satisfaction, and long-term engagement in digital consumer environments. As the technology matures, rigorous academic inquiry must parallel commercial innovation to ensure that AR's potential is both maximized and responsibly deployed.

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