



Digital Consumption as a Mirror of Identity, Emotion, and Social Belonging: A Phenomenological Insight into Generation Z in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Digital consumption has become a multifaceted aspect of economic life, particularly for Generation Z who navigate online platforms as spaces for purchasing, self-expression and social interaction. This study investigates the lived experiences of Indonesian urban youth aged 19–25, focusing on how digital consumption reflects identity construction, emotional needs, and social belonging. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 active digital consumers. Data were analyzed through thematic reduction to uncover the essence of their experiences. Findings reveal four interconnected themes: consumption as a medium of identity signaling, a tool for emotional relief and psychological escape, a response to peer influence and digital conformity, and a site of internal negotiation between desire and rationality. These insights demonstrate that online shopping extends beyond functional transactions, encompassing symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions that shape self-perception and group affiliation. The study contributes to consumer behavior scholarship by integrating phenomenological perspectives into digital economic research and offers practical implications for marketers, educators, and policymakers aiming to address the psychological and cultural dynamics of youth consumption in the platform economy.



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INTRODUCTION

Recent research has explored consumer behavior in digital environments, often focusing on behavioral patterns and economic decision-making models. While these studies have contributed to understanding what people do online, few have examined how individuals experience and interpret their digital consumption. Some studies, such as (Kundu & Ramdas, 2022), have begun to highlight the emotional and social drivers behind online shopping among Generation Z, yet they often remain descriptive without deeper exploration of meaning. Theoretical frameworks in consumer psychology and behavioral economics provide useful foundations but do not sufficiently capture the richness of subjective experience. This study addresses that gap by focusing on how consumption is lived and made meaningful by young digital consumers. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How do members of Generation Z in urban Indonesia experience and assign meaning to their digital consumption behaviors?

To explore this phenomenon, this study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach, grounded in the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl. This method was chosen for its capacity to uncover the essential meanings embedded in lived experiences (Kushwaha dkk., 2023). Unlike traditional empirical approaches, phenomenology allows for the suspension of assumptions and focuses directly on the participant's perspective. It is especially appropriate for understanding how Generation Z experiences digital consumption not just as an economic act, but as a psychological, social, and identity-related process. Through this approach, the study responds to the earlier knowledge gap by offering a deeper and more holistic insight into digital consumer experience.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the context and rationale for the study, followed by a discussion of related literature and the research gap. The next section explains the methodological framework, including the data collection and analysis process (Lam & Chen, 2022). This is followed by a detailed presentation of the findings, organized thematically, and supported by direct quotations from participants. The final sections offer a discussion of key insights, theoretical implications, and practical conclusions drawn from the participants' lived experiences.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design, rooted in the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology as a research approach emphasizes the exploration of lived experiences, aiming to uncover the essence and structure of a phenomenon as perceived by individuals in their natural context. The descriptive variant was selected to enable an in-depth understanding of the psychological meanings embedded in Generation Z's digital consumption behavior without imposing pre-existing theoretical frameworks (E. J. Lee dkk., 2024).

To achieve this, the study used two core phenomenological strategies: epoché (bracketing) and eidetic reduction. In practice, epoché involved the researcher setting aside personal assumptions and prior knowledge about digital consumption to focus solely on the participants' perspectives. Eidetic reduction, meanwhile, referred to the process of identifying essential meanings by imagining how the experience might vary while still retaining its core structure—this was done by comparing multiple accounts and extracting what remained constant across them.

This approach allowed the researcher to delve into how participants personally experienced, interpreted, and made sense of their consumption decisions within the digital platform economy—beyond statistical behavior, toward the 'why' behind each choice.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals aged between 19 and 25, all self-identified as active digital consumers and classified within Generation Z. Selection was carried out using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who had recent and regular experiences with online shopping across multiple digital platforms. Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) reside in urban areas, (2) engage in digital consumption at least three times a month, and (3) possess reflective ability to articulate their experiences. Exclusion criteria included individuals with professional affiliations to digital marketing or behavioral economics to avoid analytical bias (J. H. Lee dkk., 2019). A total of 12 participants (7 female, 5 male) were included, with an average age of 22.3 years. Participants came from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, providing a rich contextual range for thematic exploration.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to elicit nuanced descriptions of participants' digital consumption experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and location. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Interviews were carried out in a quiet and private setting to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality (Li dkk., 2022). The interview guide was adapted from existing phenomenological studies, with questions tailored to capture emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of consumption. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, adhering to the procedural framework of descriptive phenomenology. Transcripts were analyzed by identifying meaning units, which were then clustered into emerging themes through a systematic process of coding, categorization, and thematic

reduction. NVivo software was employed to assist in organizing the data, but interpretation was guided by manual engagement with each transcript (Lien dkk., 2019). The process included iterative reading, horizontalization of statements, and reduction to essential themes, followed by eidetic reflection to distill the invariant structure of participants' experiences. The final themes were cross-validated across cases to ensure coherence and representativeness of the lived phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent, and assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were explicitly communicated (Lin dkk., 2022). Data were handled in compliance with international ethical standards for qualitative research, including secure storage of transcripts and restricted access to identifiable information. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequence.

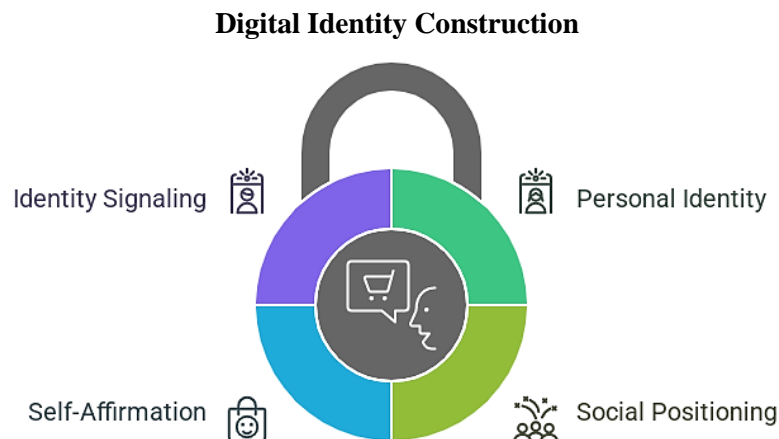
RESULTS

Digital Consumption as Identity Construction

Participants frequently described their online purchases as expressions of personal identity, social positioning, and self-affirmation. Digital platforms were perceived not merely as marketplaces, but as spaces for identity formation.

“When I choose certain brands online, it’s not just about the product. It’s like saying something about who I am, what I believe in, or what group I belong to.” (P4)

This experience suggests that digital consumption is deeply intertwined with identity signaling, especially through curated profiles, reviews, and public visibility of transactions. The decision to buy is often preceded by reflective thought about how the product aligns with the individual's aspirational self-image.



Emotional Relief and Psychological Escape

A recurring pattern in the narratives was the role of digital consumption as a coping mechanism for emotional stress. Many participants reported that online shopping served as a form of relief during moments of anxiety, isolation, or boredom.

“Sometimes I buy things just to feel in control, especially when everything around me feels chaotic. Clicking that 'Buy Now' button gives a strange sense of calm.” (P2)

This reveals a psychological layer behind digital purchases, where emotional regulation becomes a hidden driver. Consumption is no longer a rational economic transaction, but a substitute for emotional security and psychological grounding.

Social Pressure and Digital Conformity

Participants described being subtly coerced into consumption patterns by the influence of digital communities, social media algorithms, and peer expectations. The presence of curated online lifestyles created implicit benchmarks that shaped individual decisions.

“Even when I don’t need something, seeing influencers or my friends posting their hauls makes me feel like I’m missing out. It’s like a digital FOMO that pushes me to buy.” (P6)

This theme reveals the interplay between social validation and economic behavior, where consumption becomes a means of maintaining relevance within one's digital social circle.

Awareness of Contradiction and Economic Rationalization

While participants acknowledged emotional and social drivers, many also expressed inner conflict and attempts to rationalize their spending. There was a tension between awareness of excessive consumption and the effort to justify it as a “reward” or “necessity.”

“I know I overspend sometimes. But I tell myself, ‘I worked hard this week, I deserve it.’ It’s like I need to justify it to feel less guilty.” (P8)

Such reflections indicate an internal negotiation between rational economic reasoning and the emotional undercurrents of digital consumption, highlighting the complex moral and cognitive landscape of these decisions.

The findings reveal that digital consumption among Generation Z is a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by identity expression, emotional needs, social conformity, and cognitive rationalization. Rather than being purely transactional, these decisions reflect deeply rooted subjective experiences that are embedded within the broader context of digital culture and psychological adaptation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that digital consumption among Generation Z is not merely a transactional behavior but a deeply personal experience shaped by identity expression, emotional regulation, social influence, and internal conflict (Liu dkk., 2024). These themes reflect the psychological and existential dimensions of consumption, addressing the central research question regarding how young individuals experience and assign meaning to their economic behavior in the digital platform economy.

The results directly respond to the research question by uncovering how digital purchases are perceived not as isolated economic acts, but as emotionally and socially meaningful expressions. By capturing the lived experiences of participants, this study provides a unique contribution to understanding how decisions in the digital marketplace are shaped by self-perception, emotional states, and social dynamics (Marshall dkk., 2022). This perspective enriches existing discussions in behavioral economics and consumer studies by introducing a phenomenological account of decision-making that foregrounds individual meaning and intentionality.

In relation to previous literature, the present findings extend and deepen the insights offered by studies such as (Liu dkk., 2024), which identified emotional drivers in online shopping but did not explore their subjective interpretations. Similarly, while (Mazouz dkk., 2019) acknowledged digital consumption patterns, they lacked the depth of experiential analysis found here. The results affirm that digital behavior cannot be fully understood through rational models alone, aligning with phenomenological perspectives that emphasize the intentional and contextual nature of human experience (Mogapi dkk., 2019). This study thus contributes to a more comprehensive and human-centered understanding of consumption by focusing on the meanings participants themselves ascribe to their actions.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold important implications for understanding digital consumer behavior beyond functional or economic explanations. On a social level, the experience of

consumption as identity construction highlights the role of digital platforms in shaping self-presentation and group belonging among youth. Culturally, the normalization of emotional consumption and peer-driven purchasing patterns suggests a shift in how value and meaning are attributed to goods. These insights can inform educators, marketers, and policymakers aiming to foster ethical consumer education, design empathetic marketing strategies, and develop digital literacy programs that acknowledge emotional and social dynamics (Mohanty dkk., 2022). The study also raises awareness about the psychological dimensions of digital consumption, offering guidance for mental health professionals working with youth affected by digital overconsumption or online social pressures.

Study Limitations

While the phenomenological approach provides rich, in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, several limitations must be acknowledged (Nsenga & Mwaseba, 2021). First, the small and context-specific sample—limited to urban Generation Z consumers—may restrict the transferability of findings to other populations or settings. Second, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces subjectivity, which, while central to phenomenology, may vary based on participants' reflection and articulation skills. Third, the absence of longitudinal data limits understanding of how digital consumption experiences evolve over time. These limitations do not undermine the study's value but suggest caution in applying conclusions universally and underscore the importance of context in interpreting experiential data.

Future Research Directions

Building upon the insights of this study, future research could explore the evolution of digital consumption experiences over time, especially as platform technologies and cultural norms continue to shift. Comparative phenomenological studies involving diverse socioeconomic or regional groups could deepen understanding of how context shapes digital behaviour (Nguyen & Dang, 2023). Moreover, integrating interdisciplinary approaches—such as combining phenomenology with digital ethnography or narrative inquiry—may offer a more holistic view of how identity, emotion, and economy intersect in the digital age. Future inquiry could also examine how digital consumption experiences influence broader aspects of youth well-being, including self-esteem, digital dependency, and value orientation in consumer culture.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Generation Z experiences digital consumption within the context of the platform economy, focusing on the subjective meanings behind their purchasing decisions. The findings revealed that digital consumption serves as a medium for identity expression, emotional relief, social conformity, and internal negotiation. These insights address the limitations of prior research that primarily relied on behavioral and quantitative models, offering a deeper understanding of the lived experience behind economic actions. By adopting a descriptive phenomenological approach, the study captured the essence of how young consumers interpret and navigate their online transactions. The results contribute to both theory and practice by highlighting the psychological and cultural dimensions of digital consumer behavior. Future studies may expand this research by examining different demographic groups or combining phenomenology with other qualitative methods to enrich the exploration of economic subjectivity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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