



Emotional Meaning-Making in Legal Consultants Managing Digital Contract Disputes: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of the digital economy has reshaped legal practice, especially in resolving disputes involving electronic contracts. Legal consultants now face both professional and emotional challenges due to unclear legal boundaries in digital environments. Despite this, few studies have examined how consultants personally experience and manage such uncertainties. This study aims to explore the emotional experiences of legal consultants involved in digital contract disputes. Adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, it investigates how these professionals understand and respond to legal ambiguity. Twelve consultants were interviewed using semi-structured formats, and the data were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover central emotional themes. The results indicate that consultants commonly encounter professional strain, moral dilemmas, and emotional stress. They respond by engaging in ethical reasoning, emotional adjustment, and flexible problem-solving. These findings underscore the significant role of emotional insight in legal interpretation and decision-making. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the personal dimensions of legal consultancy in digital contexts. It also emphasizes the value of incorporating emotional competence into legal education and institutional frameworks.



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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of the digital economy, legal professionals are increasingly confronted with complex disputes stemming from electronically mediated transactions. As business interactions shift from traditional paper-based contracts to digital platforms, legal consultants must navigate overlapping demands of legal interpretation, technological advancement, and ethical responsibility. This transformation introduces new ambiguities and challenges established norms, requiring consultants to resolve uncertainties in real time while ensuring contractual justice and compliance. Operating within fluid legal environments—characterized by uncertain precedents and rapidly shifting regulations—places significant emotional and psychological demands on consultants.

These human dimensions of legal practice, long overlooked in academic research, are critical to understanding how professionals interpret law, make ethical decisions, and construct their professional identity in digital contexts. This study addresses this scholarly gap by examining the emotional experiences of legal consultants who manage disputes involving electronic contracts, through a phenomenological lens. Understanding the subjective experiences of legal consultants in this context is crucial. Their emotional responses are not merely personal reactions, but reflections of the larger socio-legal structures in which digital business and legal professionalism intersect. These lived experiences offer valuable insights into how legal professionals interpret, internalize, and respond to the pressures and expectations embedded in digital economic environments.

Given the dynamic interplay between personal meaning-making and professional responsibility in the digital legal space, a phenomenological approach becomes essential. It allows for a deep exploration of how legal consultants perceive and navigate their emotional realities in response to contractual ambiguity and ethical dilemmas. Such an inquiry can uncover the nuanced, often

overlooked, dimensions of emotional labor in legal consultancy—contributing not only to academic understanding but also to practical improvements in legal education, organizational support, and policy development.

The investigation of subjective experience within professional legal practice—particularly in the context of digital economic disputes—has emerged as a critical area of inquiry. In recent years, scholars have increasingly acknowledged the value of exploring how legal practitioners internally navigate professional dilemmas, especially those involving rapidly evolving technological and regulatory conditions. Yet, much of the existing literature remains focused on institutional, procedural, or doctrinal analyses, often neglecting the human experience behind legal decision-making processes (Shaikat et al., 2023; Salim & Lestari, 2020).

Studies that attempt to examine legal professionals' perspectives have largely employed quantitative survey methods, which, while valuable in capturing surface-level trends, are limited in their capacity to reveal the complex emotional, psychological, and ethical layers of lived experience. Such methods typically reduce nuanced subjective realities into discrete variables, thereby overlooking the internal meanings and contextual interpretations that shape legal consultants' responses to uncertainty and ethical ambiguity.

This methodological limitation becomes particularly problematic in the context of digital legal disputes, where consultants operate within evolving regulatory frameworks and under heightened pressure to deliver clarity amidst legal vagueness. Quantitative approaches do not adequately capture how these professionals construct meaning, experience emotional strain, or reconcile moral dilemmas within such fluid environments. As a result, the essence of the phenomenon—the lived emotional experience of legal consultants facing digital legal challenges—remains underexplored and poorly understood.

To address this gap, a methodological approach is needed that prioritizes depth over breadth and centers the voices and meanings of those directly experiencing the phenomenon. Phenomenology, particularly in its interpretative form, offers such an avenue by allowing researchers to explore not only what professionals experience but how they make sense of it within their socio-legal contexts.

In the context of digital economic disputes, prevailing solutions often rely on procedural legal analysis and institutional guidelines to address contractual disagreements involving electronic platforms. These practical frameworks, while essential for regulatory enforcement, predominantly focus on codified law, precedent application, and compliance mechanisms. They offer structured guidance for dispute resolution but remain insufficient in capturing the lived emotional and cognitive experiences of legal consultants who operate within these ambiguous legal spaces.

Existing approaches—including doctrinal legal analysis and empirical legal studies—frequently treat legal actors as passive agents within regulatory systems rather than as reflective individuals navigating emotionally and ethically complex terrains (Kumar & Singh, 2021; Rahman & Jusuf, 2022). Consequently, these methods fail to illuminate how legal consultants internalize uncertainty, experience professional vulnerability, and negotiate moral tensions while interpreting or applying law in real time. As a result, the understanding of legal consultancy in digital contexts remains procedural and externally defined, lacking insight into the subjective dimensions that significantly shape professional practice.

To bridge this gap, there is a pressing need for research that not only investigates what legal consultants do but also explores how they feel, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences. A phenomenological approach, particularly one that is interpretative in nature, offers the methodological depth required to uncover the essence of these lived experiences. This perspective enables a more holistic understanding of legal consultancy—one that centers emotional complexity, personal meaning-making, and moral negotiation as integral to professional performance in the digital legal landscape.

Previous research has explored the challenges faced by legal professionals in digital contexts, focusing primarily on regulatory interpretation, access to legal certainty, and the institutionalization of dispute resolution mechanisms. While these studies provide useful structural insights, they often overlook the internal, emotional experiences of those who must interpret and apply law under pressure.

The subjective dimension—how legal consultants understand and respond to digital legal ambiguity—remains underrepresented in the literature. Some scholars, such as Shaukat et al. (2023) and Salim & Lestari (2020), have highlighted legal uncertainty in Special Economic Zones, but with limited attention to the personal experiences of legal actors. These gaps confirm the importance of exploring how emotional meaning is formed within professional legal decision-making in digital dispute contexts.

This article adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to investigate the lived emotional experiences of legal consultants handling digital economic disputes based on electronic contracts. IPA was selected because it allows a focused and in-depth analysis of how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific contexts. This method addresses the limitations outlined in the previous section, by shifting the focus from what professionals do to how they feel, interpret, and respond to the phenomenon. The study reveals that emotional dynamics are central to understanding professional responsibility in legal consultancy under digital legal uncertainty. Through this method, the study contributes new insights into the intersection between emotion, ethics, and law in digital economic environments.

The structure of this article is as follows: The introduction outlines the broader and specific background of the study and presents the research gap. The method section details the interpretative phenomenological framework, including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The results section presents the major themes identified from the interviews, supported by narrative description and direct participant quotations. The discussion section explores the implications of the findings in relation to existing theory and literature. The article concludes by summarizing the key contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the emotional dynamics experienced by legal consultants in managing digital economic disputes involving electronic contracts.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen due to its focus on understanding how individuals make sense of complex and emotionally nuanced phenomena within their lived contexts.

Grounded in Heideggerian hermeneutics, IPA enabled a deep, interpretive engagement with the subjective meanings attributed to legal ambiguity, professional responsibility, and ethical tension.

This methodological alignment allowed the researchers to uncover rich experiential insights from the participants' professional realities..

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that each individual possessed substantial and directly relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be active legal consultants with a minimum of three years of experience in handling digital economic disputes involving electronic contracts.

A total of twelve participants (7 male, 5 female), aged 33 to 57 years ($M = 44.8$), were recruited.

All had handled digital contract disputes within the past two years and were affiliated with either private law firms or legal departments in digital-based enterprises.

The sample size of twelve was deemed sufficient based on the principle of phenomenological saturation, wherein no new themes emerged during the final interviews—indicating adequacy in capturing the core emotional patterns across cases.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich, narrative data.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, private settings such as offices or meeting rooms. An interview guide was developed and refined through a pilot test to ensure clarity and depth. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English.

Confidentiality and scheduling flexibility were prioritized to foster participant openness.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the established stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):

- Multiple readings of each transcript to immerse in the data.
- Initial noting to identify descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, with emphasis on emotionally significant expressions.
- Development of emergent themes from initial codes, capturing the essence of the participants' meanings.
- Identification of patterns across cases (cross-case analysis), leading to the clustering of themes.

Integration of themes into a coherent structure representing the emotional landscape of legal consultancy in digital disputes.

NVivo software supported the coding and theme organization process, ensuring traceability and rigor in analysis.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the institutional ethics committee overseeing social research. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity was preserved through pseudonyms, and data were stored securely with limited access. The study followed the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and adhered to national standards regarding participant welfare and data protection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from in-depth interviews with legal consultants who have direct experience in handling digital economic disputes related to electronic contracts. Through the process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), four major themes emerged that illuminate the participants' emotional dynamics and subjective meaning-making processes in engaging with legal ambiguities in the digital economy.

Navigating Legal Ambiguity in Digital Contractual Contexts

Participants described their experiences of facing legal uncertainty when dealing with disputes that involved electronic contracts, often encountering a lack of clear regulatory guidance. This ambiguity induced emotional stress and demanded high levels of professional adaptability.

“There are days I feel like I’m walking on thin legal ice. The law hasn’t caught up with how fast digital business moves, and I’m expected to offer certainty where none exists.” (Participant 4)

The absence of explicit statutory interpretations of digital contracts pushed consultants to rely on legal reasoning, analogical thinking, and personal intuition—often accompanied by anxiety about legal missteps and reputational risks.

Emotional Tensions Between Professional Responsibility and Legal Fluidity

A consistent theme was the inner conflict consultants felt between maintaining professional responsibility and working within an evolving, and often unclear, digital legal environment.

“You want to protect your client, but what if the legal ground keeps shifting? It feels like trying to hold water in your hands.” (Participant 1)

This emotional tension manifested as feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and emotional exhaustion, particularly in high-stakes cases where financial or reputational consequences for clients were severe.

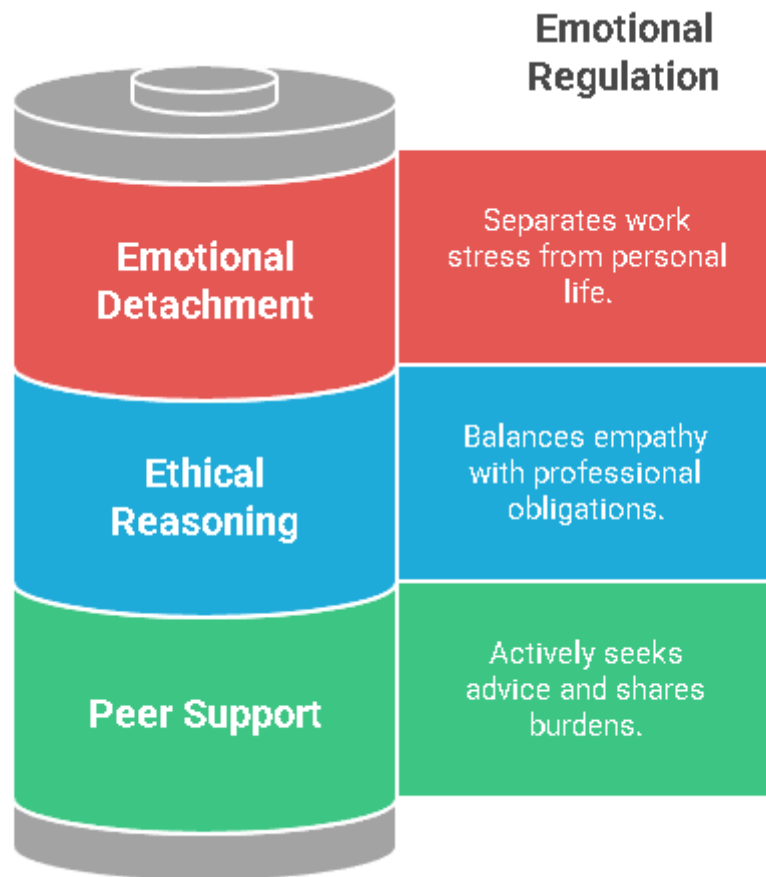
Coping Mechanisms and Emotional Regulation Strategies

Despite the emotional strain, participants revealed various adaptive strategies to manage the stress inherent in digital economic litigation. These included peer consultations, ethical deliberation, and emotional distancing techniques.

“I’ve learned not to carry the weight of every case home. After work, I meditate or talk to peers. Otherwise, it eats away at you.” (Participant 6)

This theme underscores the human resilience behind legal consultancy, as professionals navigate emotionally charged cases while preserving mental well-being and decision-making clarity.

Emotional regulation strategies in digital economic litigation consultancy.



Ethical Dilemmas and Moral Stress in Digital Negotiations

Several consultants encountered situations where legal grey areas overlapped with moral grey zones, leading to heightened moral stress.

“Sometimes, what’s legal isn’t ethical—and vice versa. I’ve had clients who exploited digital loopholes. Legally, I could defend them. Morally, I hesitated.” (Participant 2)

This conflict between professional obligation and personal ethics evoked profound emotional discomfort, highlighting the psychological burden of navigating digital business ethics.

Across all themes, the emotional dynamics of legal consultants emerged as complex, deeply personal, and context-dependent. Their experiences reveal a legal environment in flux, where emotional resilience, ethical clarity, and adaptive cognition are indispensable in navigating digital economic disputes. The essence of the phenomenon lies in their constant negotiation between professional identity and the psychological demands of digital legal practice.

The findings of this study reveal that legal consultants experience a complex interplay of emotional strain, ethical reflection, and strategic adaptation when handling digital economic disputes based on electronic contracts. These emotional dynamics—centered around legal ambiguity, professional responsibility, and ethical uncertainty—highlight the deeply personal and situational nature of legal interpretation in the digital age, directly addressing the research question on how consultants make sense of legal uncertainty in evolving regulatory contexts.

The emotional narratives uncovered through this research offer a significant contribution to understanding the subjective realities of legal consultants, particularly in relation to the demands of

digital dispute resolution. These professionals do not merely apply legal rules; rather, they continuously interpret, negotiate, and emotionally process the ambiguous legal frameworks in which they operate. The study responds to the previously identified gap by shifting the focus from external legal structures to internal meaning-making, thereby illustrating how emotional labor becomes a central element of legal consultancy under uncertain conditions.

These findings are consistent with prior studies that address emotional labor in professional contexts, yet they extend the discussion into the legal domain, which has historically prioritized rationality and objectivity. For example, while Rahman & Jusuf (2022) highlighted the challenges of regulatory implementation in sharia-compliant business environments, their analysis lacked the introspective depth provided by phenomenological inquiry. Similarly, Kumar & Singh (2021) acknowledged bureaucratic complexity in foreign investment cases, but did not explore how such complexity is internalized emotionally by legal actors. By applying interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study advances the discourse on legal professional identity and emotional resilience, offering a richer and more human-centered understanding of digital legal practice.

The findings of this study carry important implications for both legal scholarship and professional practice. At a scholarly level, the results emphasize the need to reframe legal consultancy as an emotionally embedded process, particularly within the shifting terrain of digital economic regulation. Socially and professionally, these insights suggest that legal consultants require not only technical competence but also emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity to navigate uncertainty and maintain professional integrity. In a broader context, this research highlights the psychological demands placed on legal practitioners in the digital age—demands that may affect their decision-making, client interactions, and long-term professional well-being. These implications call for the development of support mechanisms within legal institutions, including reflective training and mental health awareness initiatives tailored to the digital legal domain.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for phenomenological research, may restrict the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific population studied. All participants were legal consultants operating within Indonesian legal and cultural frameworks, which may shape how legal ambiguity and emotional responses are experienced. Additionally, although the interpretative phenomenological method enabled rich exploration, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the potential for recall bias or social desirability effects. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather provide boundaries within which the results should be understood.

Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring comparative experiences across different legal systems, cultural settings, or types of digital dispute resolution. Longitudinal studies may also offer valuable insights into how legal consultants' emotional dynamics evolve over time, particularly as digital contract law matures and regulatory structures adapt. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaborations between law, psychology, and digital ethics could enrich understanding of how emotional resilience and ethical reasoning interact in complex legal environments. Such future directions hold promise for advancing not only academic theory but also practical strategies for supporting legal professionals in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the emotional dynamics experienced by legal consultants in managing digital economic disputes involving electronic contracts, particularly under conditions of legal ambiguity. The research revealed that consultants often encounter emotional tension, ethical dilemmas, and professional uncertainty when navigating evolving digital legal frameworks. These findings emphasize that legal consultancy is not merely a procedural function, but a deeply emotional and interpretive practice. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study addressed a critical gap in the literature by uncovering how legal professionals construct meaning in uncertain digital contexts. The insights gained carry practical implications for the design of legal education curricula, particularly the inclusion of modules on emotional literacy, adaptive decision-making, and

reflective ethics. In addition, institutions and law firms are encouraged to establish structured emotional support systems, such as peer supervision, resilience workshops, and case debriefings, to help consultants cope with stress and moral pressure. Policy frameworks should also consider integrating psychological resilience training and ethical preparedness into professional certification standards for digital legal practice. Future studies may extend this work by conducting cross-jurisdictional comparisons of legal consultants' emotional experiences, particularly between civil law and common law systems. Longitudinal research could also examine how emotional coping mechanisms evolve over time as digital regulations and technologies continue to change. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches combining legal studies with psychology or organizational behavior may yield deeper insights into the affective dimensions of professional legal practice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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