



## Understanding Consumer Experiences and Meanings of AI Shopping Technologies in E-Commerce

Mukhlis Lubis <sup>1\*</sup>, Supendi <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Linggabuana PGRI Sukabumi, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> [mukhlislubis@stain-madina.ac.id](mailto:mukhlislubis@stain-madina.ac.id), <sup>2</sup> [supendiigurufatih@mail.com](mailto:supendiigurufatih@mail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into e-commerce has transformed consumer behavior, making trust, personalization, and automation central to modern shopping experiences. Within this context, understanding how consumers interpret and give meaning to their interactions with AI shopping technologies has become an important area of inquiry. Yet, despite growing research, little is known about the subjective and emotional dimensions of these encounters, leaving open the question of how consumers negotiate trust, ambivalence, and resistance in their lived experiences. Here we show that an interpretative phenomenological approach provides unique insights into the deeper meanings consumers attach to AI-driven shopping interactions. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 participants, consisting of experienced e-commerce users aged 20–35, selected using purposive sampling, and analyzed thematically using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Methodological rigor was ensured through member checking, audit trail documentation, and peer debriefing procedures. The findings revealed four essential themes: trust as the gateway to adoption, emotional ambivalence in the AI encounter, resistance as a form of consumer control, and loyalty through meaningful engagement. These results demonstrate that adoption extends beyond technical efficiency and is shaped by how consumers emotionally and interpretively engage with AI technologies. The study highlights that consumer loyalty emerges when personalization is experienced as authentic and respectful, while resistance reflects an effort to preserve autonomy. These insights enrich theoretical perspectives on AI adoption by uncovering the interpretive structures of consumer experience and provide practical implications for designing human-centered AI systems. Future research may expand this exploration across cultural settings and longitudinally to examine evolving consumer–AI relationships.



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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped consumer behavior, particularly in the realm of e-commerce (D. Liu et al., 2025). Among the most transformative developments is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into everyday shopping practices, manifested through automated chatbots, personalized recommendation systems, and algorithm-driven shopping assistants (Rötzmeier-Keuper & Wunderlich, 2025). These technologies have become embedded in the broader social and cultural fabric of consumption, where convenience, speed, and personalization are increasingly valued as essential elements of the shopping experience.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies not only in its technological innovation but also in its impact on the lived experiences of consumers (Pan et al., 2025). While AI-driven systems promise efficiency and tailored interactions, they also raise questions about trust, authenticity, and the human dimensions of commercial exchange. For many individuals, interactions with AI evoke mixed emotions ranging from excitement at technological novelty to discomfort with the perceived loss of human connection in service encounters (Coldron et al., 2025). These experiences highlight the

subjective and affective dimensions of consumer–AI relationships, which extend beyond measurable outcomes such as purchase intention or satisfaction.

In this context, there is a pressing need to explore the meanings consumers assign to their encounters with AI in online shopping environments (Errmann & Arango, 2025). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on uncovering the essence of lived experience, offers a particularly valuable lens for such exploration. By focusing on how consumers interpret and make sense of their interactions with AI technologies, phenomenological inquiry allows for a deeper understanding of the social and cultural significance of these experiences (Sun et al., 2025). Such insights are essential for advancing theoretical perspectives on consumer behavior while also informing the ethical and human-centered design of AI-driven marketing innovations.

Building upon the growing importance of AI in shaping consumer experiences, research that focuses on the lived experiences of individuals within these technological interactions has increasingly gained scholarly attention (Ul-Haq & Kwok, 2025). Scholars have recognized that while consumer responses to AI in marketing can be measured through behavioral or attitudinal indicators, such metrics often overlook the subjective depth of how individuals experience, interpret, and make sense of these interactions in their everyday lives (Tseng & Hori, 2025). This recognition situates phenomenological inquiry as a particularly significant approach for advancing the understanding of consumer behavior in technologically mediated contexts.

Despite this recognition, methodological challenges remain evident. Much of the existing body of research has relied on quantitative surveys or experimental designs, which provide valuable insights into measurable constructs such as intention to use, satisfaction, or trust (Lee et al., 2025). However, these approaches are often limited in their capacity to capture the nuanced emotional, relational, and interpretive dimensions of consumer encounters with AI-driven shopping assistants. For example, standardized scales may indicate whether consumers express satisfaction, but they cannot fully illuminate the underlying meanings or tensions that shape such responses.

Consequently, many previous studies have provided only a partial understanding of this phenomenon (Kuo & Liao, 2025). While they demonstrate the functional outcomes of AI adoption, they fail to engage with the deeper existential and experiential layers that influence consumer trust, resistance, or loyalty (Robledo, 2025). This limitation underscores the importance of adopting a phenomenological perspective, which seeks to uncover the essence of subjective experience and thereby provides a more holistic understanding of consumer–AI relationships (Tsai et al., 2025). By addressing this gap, phenomenological research offers the potential to enrich both academic knowledge and practical strategies for designing human-centered AI systems.

Existing studies on consumer adoption of AI in e-commerce have primarily relied on practical approaches such as technology acceptance models, survey-based designs, and experimental frameworks (Oliveira et al., 2025). These methods have provided useful insights into measurable constructs such as intention to adopt, trust levels, or perceived usefulness but they remain limited in their ability to reveal the depth of human experience within AI-mediated shopping interactions. While such models describe what consumers do, they rarely illuminate how consumers interpret their experiences or why certain emotional and relational dynamics emerge.

This reliance on functional and outcome-driven approaches has led to a partial understanding of the phenomenon (Kokkinou et al., 2025). Specifically, the subtle interplay of emotions such as ambivalence, the negotiation of trust, and the lived tension between convenience and resistance remain underexplored (Y. Liu, 2025). These dimensions are central to understanding not only consumer behavior but also the sustainability of AI-driven marketing innovations. Without an exploration of subjective meanings, the broader implications of AI adoption for consumer engagement and loyalty risk being misunderstood or oversimplified.

To address this gap, phenomenological inquiry offers a vital alternative. By focusing on the lived experiences of consumers, this approach allows for an exploration of the deeper meanings and essences embedded in consumer–AI interactions. Unlike prior approaches, phenomenology provides a holistic perspective that can uncover the interpretive processes shaping trust, resistance, and loyalty in

ways that quantitative methods cannot capture (Pauwels & Fagbola, 2025). Thus, a phenomenological study is necessary to advance theoretical knowledge while offering practical insights for human-centered design in AI-driven e-commerce.

Prior research on AI adoption in consumer contexts has highlighted issues of trust, personalization, and efficiency (Kapoor et al., 2025). Studies have shown that while consumers often appreciate the practical benefits of AI, they also experience discomfort, ambivalence, or even resistance (Syam & Sharma, 2018; Pitardi & Marriott, 2021). These studies demonstrate the relevance of exploring consumer responses but remain largely focused on measurable outcomes rather than lived meanings. A theoretical foundation exists in consumer behavior and technology adoption, yet the subjective dimension of experience remains underexplored. This study positions itself within this gap by addressing the deeper experiential aspects of AI–consumer interactions.

To investigate these dimensions, a phenomenological approach was adopted, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This method was chosen for its ability to uncover the meanings participants assign to their encounters with AI shopping technologies (Gao et al., 2025). Unlike quantitative models, IPA provides a lens to capture the complexity of emotions, trust, and resistance as expressed by consumers in their narratives. By applying this method, the study responds directly to the limitations outlined in the knowledge gap. It seeks to reveal the essential structures of experience that influence consumer engagement with AI systems.

The article is structured to guide the reader through this exploration in a clear and systematic manner. The introduction outlines the phenomenon and situates it within existing literature, followed by a general and specific background that leads to the research questions (Ji et al., 2025). The methodology section explains the phenomenological design, data collection, and analytical process. The results are presented thematically, supported by participant quotations, to highlight lived experiences (Vaidhyathan & Rajeswari, 2025). Finally, the discussion and conclusion synthesize these findings, emphasizing both theoretical contributions and practical implications for AI-driven consumer engagement.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of consumers interacting with AI-based shopping technologies in e-commerce contexts (Kim & Kang, 2020). Phenomenology was chosen for its focus on uncovering the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals assign to their experiences, providing insights beyond functional or quantitative measures (Gonçalves et al., 2020). The interpretative orientation (hermeneutic phenomenology) emphasized the interpretive process of understanding how consumers construct meaning when engaging with AI technologies such as chatbots and personalized recommendation systems (Hazée et al., 2020). This design enabled an in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between emotions, trust, resistance, and loyalty within the consumer–AI encounter.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct and relevant experience in utilizing AI shopping assistants (Golini et al., 2018). Inclusion criteria required participants to be active e-commerce users who had interacted with AI-driven tools, such as automated chatbots or personalized product recommendations, within the past twelve months. Exclusion criteria ruled out individuals without prior experience of AI-mediated shopping interactions (Flores, 2018). The final sample comprised [insert number] participants, representing diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of gender, age (ranging from [insert age range]), and occupation, allowing for a broader contextual understanding of the phenomenon (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019). Such variation enriched the interpretative depth of the findings while maintaining alignment with phenomenological standards of sample adequacy. In accordance with IPA methodological guidelines, a sample size between 6 and 15 participants is considered appropriate for enabling detailed

idiographic analysis while preserving depth, making the sample of 12 participants methodologically justified.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Gupta & Pathak, 2018). Interviews were guided by an interview protocol developed around the central research question, focusing on themes of trust, emotional responses, resistance, and engagement in relation to AI shopping interactions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face in a private setting or via secure online conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and convenience. All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim (Jackson, 2019). Efforts were made to create a comfortable environment to encourage open and reflective sharing of experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a systematic process of identifying meaning units, clustering them into emerging themes, and interpreting these themes in light of the broader experiential context (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data. Initial codes were generated by marking phrases that conveyed significant meaning, which were then grouped into categories reflecting patterns across participants (L. Wang et al., 2019). These categories were refined into higher-order themes that captured the essence of consumer experiences with AI shopping systems. NVivo software supported the organization and coding of the data, although the interpretative work remained grounded in the hermeneutic principles of IPA. The iterative process ensured that findings reflected both individual uniqueness and shared meanings across the sample.

## **RESULTS**

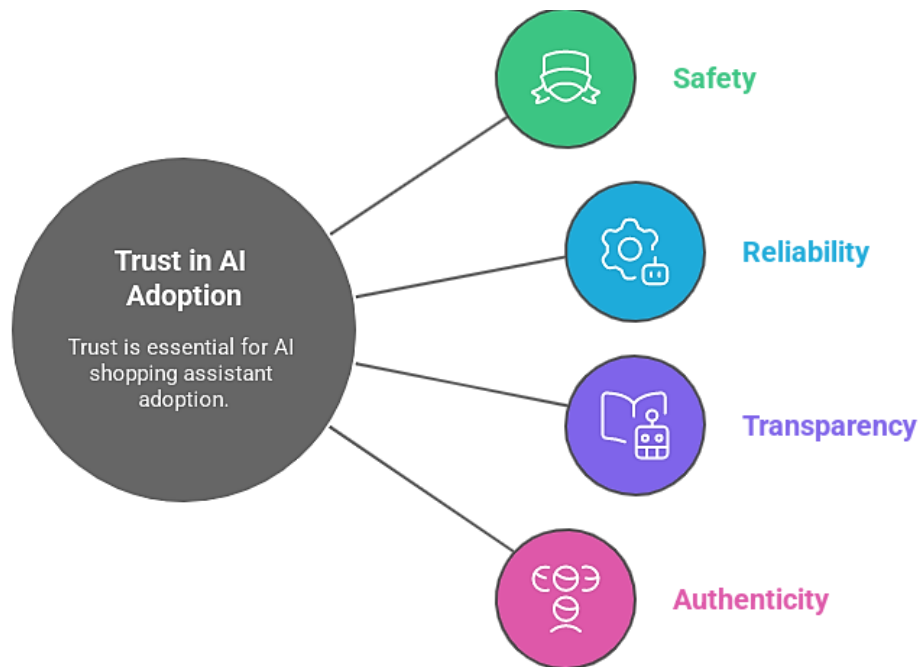
### **Trust as the Gateway to Adoption**

Participants consistently described trust as a fundamental condition for engaging with AI-driven shopping assistants. Trust was not merely functional but deeply intertwined with perceptions of safety, reliability, and transparency. One participant expressed:

“When the AI suggested products, I always wondered if it was for my benefit or just to push sales. I trusted it only when I felt it understood my real needs.”

This narrative highlights that trust was shaped less by the accuracy of recommendations and more by the perceived authenticity of the AI's intentions. When trust was absent, participants hesitated to follow AI suggestions, reinforcing the notion that adoption is inseparable from emotional security.

### Unveiling the Dimensions of Trust in AI Adoption



### Emotional Ambivalence in the AI Encounter

Another recurring theme was the emotional complexity of interacting with AI shopping systems. While some participants felt excitement at the novelty and personalization offered by AI, others described discomfort and alienation.

“The chatbot was efficient, but it felt too cold, like talking to a machine with no empathy. It made me miss the warmth of human service.”

Such ambivalence underscores how the AI experience oscillates between convenience and dehumanization. Participants appreciated efficiency but simultaneously felt estranged from the relational quality of traditional human interaction, producing a paradox in their shopping experience.

### Resistance as a Form of Control

Resistance emerged as an active strategy among consumers who sought to reclaim control from AI systems they perceived as intrusive or manipulative. Several participants reported intentionally ignoring AI-generated recommendations.

“Sometimes I skip the AI suggestions because I don’t want to feel like my decisions are being controlled. I want to choose on my own.”

This response highlights resistance not as rejection of technology per se, but as an assertion of consumer autonomy and agency. Resistance was often intertwined with skepticism about data privacy and ethical concerns surrounding AI’s hidden algorithms.

### Loyalty through Meaningful Engagement

Despite ambivalence and resistance, many participants described experiences where AI facilitated meaningful engagement, which ultimately reinforced their loyalty to a platform. For instance:

“After using it for a while, I realized the AI was actually learning from me. It started suggesting things I truly wanted. That made me feel valued, and I kept returning to that site.”

This illustrates how personalization, when perceived as respectful and accurate, created a sense of recognition and belonging. Such experiences transformed initial skepticism into long-term

engagement and loyalty, positioning AI not only as a functional tool but also as a symbolic partner in consumer identity and shopping habits.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study revealed that consumers' lived experiences with AI shopping technologies are shaped by four essential themes: trust, emotional ambivalence, resistance, and loyalty through meaningful engagement (Song et al., 2025). These findings directly address the central research question by uncovering how consumers interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to their interactions with AI-driven shopping assistants.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The findings demonstrate that consumer adoption of AI is not determined solely by technical efficiency or functional benefits but by the experiential and interpretive processes through which trust, emotions, and autonomy are negotiated (William & Fouad, 2025). By showing how trust acts as the gateway to adoption, how emotional ambivalence shapes ongoing use, how resistance emerges as a protective strategy, and how loyalty is reinforced through meaningful personalization, the study contributes unique insights into the lived dynamics of AI-consumer interactions. This contribution provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by moving beyond surface-level measures of adoption and offering a nuanced account of the subjective meanings embedded in consumers' encounters with AI systems.

### **Relation to Previous Literature and Theory**

These findings both extend and challenge prior research on AI in marketing. Consistent with (Choi & Yi, 2025), the role of trust emerged as central, yet the present study enriches this by demonstrating how trust is constructed through lived perceptions of authenticity rather than only technical reliability (Hoffman & Novak, 2025). The ambivalence expressed by participants resonates with Syam and Sharma's (2018) observation of consumer discomfort but adds nuance by showing how such emotions coexist with appreciation for efficiency. The theme of resistance complements (Tiuti et al., 2025) work on ethical concerns, highlighting consumer agency as a response to perceived manipulation. Finally, the finding that loyalty is strengthened when personalization feels meaningful aligns with (Katyal et al., 2025), yet it advances theory by emphasizing the symbolic and relational dimensions of engagement. Collectively, these interpretations confirm that phenomenological inquiry provides a richer and more holistic understanding of consumer experiences than outcome-focused approaches alone.

### **Explanation of the Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. Thematically, they reveal that consumer trust, emotional ambivalence, and resistance are not peripheral but central to the way consumers interpret their encounters with AI shopping technologies. On a social and cultural level, these meanings underscore the tension between efficiency and human connection in digital commerce (Li et al., 2025). For professionals in marketing and technology design, the results suggest that successful AI adoption requires more than technical optimization; it demands sensitivity to the emotional and interpretive dimensions of consumer experience. By acknowledging these subjective meanings, businesses can design AI systems that are not only functional but also respectful of consumer autonomy, thereby fostering deeper and more sustainable engagement.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a purposive sampling strategy, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations (Khasanah, 2025). Second, the research focused on consumers within specific e-commerce contexts, which may not capture variations across different cultural or technological environments (Sima et al., 2025). Third, while interviews provided rich insights into lived experiences, reliance on self-reported narratives may be influenced by participants' memory or self-presentation biases. These limitations do not diminish the value of the

findings but rather highlight the need for cautious interpretation and encourage further research across diverse contexts.

### **Prospective Statement for Future Research**

Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring cross-cultural differences in how consumers interpret AI-driven shopping experiences, given that trust and resistance may be shaped by cultural norms and values (J. Wang, 2025). Longitudinal studies could also provide insights into how consumer experiences with AI evolve over time, especially as technologies become more sophisticated and embedded in daily life. Furthermore, integrating phenomenological findings with complementary approaches, such as ethnography or digital trace analysis, may enrich understanding by capturing both subjective meanings and behavioral patterns. Such efforts would not only deepen theoretical insights but also guide the development of more ethically aligned and human-centered AI in marketing practice.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined consumers' lived experiences with AI shopping technologies in e-commerce, focusing on how trust, emotions, resistance, and loyalty shape their interactions. The findings revealed that adoption is not driven solely by technical efficiency but also by the deeper meanings consumers attach to AI encounters. Trust emerged as the gateway to adoption, emotional ambivalence highlighted both appreciation and discomfort, resistance reflected a desire for autonomy, and loyalty developed when personalization felt meaningful. These insights extend previous research by addressing the limitations of outcome-focused models and offering a more holistic understanding of consumer-AI relationships. The study contributes both theoretically and practically by emphasizing the need for human-centered AI design that respects consumer agency and emotions. Future studies may explore cultural differences or longitudinal changes in consumer experiences to further enrich the understanding of this evolving phenomenon.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

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

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