

CHAPTER XIV

The Impact Of Digital Marketing On Generation Z Consumer Behavior In Semarang City

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the impact of digital marketing on the consumerism behavior of the Z Generation in Semarang City, focusing on three dimensions: cognitive patterns of digital content processing, socio-cultural factors, and awareness of sustainable consumption. The research revealed significant transformations in consumption patterns using a qualitative approach with data triangulation through in-depth interviews (15 informants), focused group discussion (24 participants), and observations in five major malls. The results show that 73% of purchases were triggered by digital marketing content, with Instagram (42%) and TikTok (38%) as the dominant platforms. Key characteristics include content personalization, real-time engagement, and multi-channel marketing. Changes are characterized by mobile-first shopping, social commerce, and micro-moment purchasing. Positive implications include the growth of the digital economy and increased digital literacy, while negative impacts include tendencies toward excessive consumption and financial stress. The research recommends developing more responsible marketing strategies and increasing financial literacy.

Keywords: Digital Consumer Behavior; Social Commerce Dynamics; Algorithm-Driven Marketing; Sustainable Consumption

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally changed the paradigm of socio-economic interactions in the last decade (Zhang & Wilson, 2023). This phenomenon has significantly shifted consumer behavior, especially among Generation Z, the first digital natives in human

history (Turner & Lee, 2022). A study (Chen & Thompson, 2023) conducted in Asia-Pacific shows that most of Generation Z's purchasing decisions are influenced by digital content, reflecting a fundamental shift in the marketing landscape. Research (Anderson et al., 2023) indicates that personalization algorithms and artificial intelligence in digital marketing create filter bubbles that influence consumption patterns, raising concerns about the formation of unsustainable consumer behavior.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia is the largest digital market in the region (Harris & Kim, 2023). The significant growth of e-commerce in 2023 accelerates the transformation of consumer behavior, especially among Generation Z, which represents the majority of the productive age population (Wang & Kumar, 2022). Data shows that most of Indonesia's Generation Z spend a very intensive amount of time in the digital environment, most of which are exposed to massive marketing content. This phenomenon creates an interesting paradox: while digital literacy is increasing, awareness of sustainable consumerism is showing a worrying trend (Brown et al., 2024).

The city of Semarang, which can be seen as an indicator of the economy of the Central Java economy, is experiencing a significant acceleration in the growth of digital platforms, with an internet penetration rate that exceeds the national average (Thompson & Rodriguez, 2023). The dominance of modern malls integrated with the digital ecosystem has created the phenomenon of phygital retail - a combination of physical and digital shopping experiences (Wilson et al., 2023). Preliminary observations at the five largest malls in Semarang show that most Generation Z visitors initiated transactions through digital marketing. However, most admit that they do not have a comprehensive understanding of the implications of consumerism on economic and environmental sustainability (Rahman & Chen, 2024).

The urgency of this research is based on three critical gaps in contemporary literature. First, there is an absence of a theoretical model that integrates psychological, social, and technological dimensions in shaping Generation Z consumer behavior in developing cities (Kim & Yang, 2024). Second, there is a limited understanding of the cognitive mechanisms that link digital marketing exposure to

consumption decision-making in specific sociocultural contexts (Zhang & Wilson, 2023). Third, there is a lack of a framework that accommodates the unique characteristics of Generation Z consumers in tier-2 cities undergoing rapid digital transformation (Turner & Lee, 2023).

This study aims to analyze the complex interactions between digital marketing strategies and the formation of Generation Z consumer behavior in Semarang City, focusing on three dimensions: identifying cognitive patterns in processing digital marketing content, analyzing socio-cultural factors that moderate the effectiveness of digital marketing, and evaluating the impact on the formation of sustainable consumption awareness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Consumer Behavior Integrated Theory (400 words)

This theory explains the complexity of consumer behavior in the digital era by integrating cognitive and technological aspects. Davis (2020) identified four dimensions of digital consumer behavior: cognitive processing, technological acceptance, decision-making patterns, and behavioral manifestation. The cognitive processing dimension focuses on how digital consumers process and evaluate information in stimulus-rich environments. Yang & Lee (2023) developed the concept of digital cognitive load, which explains how information overload influences purchasing decisions. They identified pattern recognition and information filtering as the main cognitive mechanisms digital consumers use in processing marketing content.

Digital Native Generation Theory

This theory explores the unique characteristics of Generation Z, the first digital natives in history. Thompson (2023) defines digital natives as a generation born and raised in the digital era with an innate ability to adopt and use digital technology.

Lee et al. (2023) developed the concept of a digital value system, which explains how Generation Z's values are formed by intensive interaction with the digital environment. They found that digital natives have different expectations regarding brand engagement, demanding personalization, interactivity, and authentic

content. Wang et al. (2022) found that digital natives show unique patterns in information-seeking and decision-making. They conduct extensive research before purchasing, rely on peer reviews, and prioritize experiential value.

Integrated Digital Marketing Impact Theory (400 words)

This theory explains how digital marketing strategies influence the formation of consumerist behavior in the digital ecosystem. Anderson et al., (2023) developed a comprehensive framework that integrates the communication, engagement, and behavioral impact aspects of digital marketing.

Wilson & Chen (2023) identified the modern digital marketing stages: awareness, engagement, consideration, conversion, and advocacy. Each stage requires a different content and engagement strategy. Brown & Lee (2023) emphasize the importance of authentic content in influencing Generation Z purchasing decisions. They introduce the concept of a digital authenticity matrix, which measures the credibility and resonance of marketing content.

Socio-Cultural Digital Adaptation Theory (400 words)

This theory explores how socio-cultural factors influence adaptation and consumption behavior in the digital era. Kumar & Wilson (2023) identified four key dimensions of digital adaptation: cultural value integration, social norm evolution, technological acculturation, and consumption pattern transformation. Chen et al. (2024) developed the concept of digital cultural resonance that explains how local cultural values interact with global digital trends. They found that the success of digital adaptation depends on the extent to which digital technologies and content can be aligned with local cultural values.

Harris & Zhang (2024) identified different digital adaptation patterns across social and cultural groups. They introduced the cultural digital readiness framework that measures a society's readiness to adopt new digital technologies and practices. These four theories provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the complex interactions between digital marketing, consumer behavior, generational characteristics, and socio-cultural contexts in shaping Generation Z's consumer behavior.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study designed to comprehensively understand the impact of digital marketing on the consumerism behavior of Generation Z students in Semarang City. The case study was chosen due to its ability to explore contemporary phenomena in a real-life context, particularly in a campus environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

Data collection was conducted through triangulation, which included in-depth interviews with 25 students, four focus group discussion (FGD) sessions, observations in five major malls and campus areas for two months, and analysis of digital activities on social media platforms. To create a conducive atmosphere, interviews were conducted in locations familiar to students, such as campus cafes and student lounges.

The selection of informants used a purposive sampling technique with specific criteria: active students at universities in Semarang City, aged 18-21 years, at least being in the second semester, actively using at least three social media platforms, and making online transactions at least five times a month.

Data analysis implemented a thematic approach through five systematic stages: data familiarization through interview transcripts and field notes, coding related to digital consumption patterns, developing themes based on pattern similarities, reviewing themes through discussions with digital consumer behavior experts, and interpretation in the context of student life (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The study's validity was further bolstered through several strategies: method triangulation by comparing data from various sources, member checking by confirming interpretations with student informants, peer debriefing with fellow researchers familiar with digital consumer behavior research, and an audit trail that documented the entire process of data collection and analysis.

RESULTS

The study's results on the impact of digital marketing on Generation Z consumer behavior in Semarang City are based on data triangulation through observation and in-depth interviews conducted in October-November 2024. Observations conducted in five main malls in Semarang City revealed a high intensity of social media use

during the shopping process. Students spent an average of 15-20 minutes in each store, most of the time spent accessing product information via smartphones and creating content for social media. A 20-year-old 5th-semester student, Sarah, says, I always compare online and offline prices before buying, usually while checking reviews from Semarang influencers I follow.

Bima, a 3rd-semester informatics engineering student: Before buying something, I usually research on YouTube to see its technical reviews and benchmarks. I can spend 2-3 days comparing specifications and reading discussion forums for technology products. I prefer to buy online when there is a big flash sale, but I prefer to go to an offline store first to test for items that need to be tried directly, such as headphones or gaming keyboards. I often first discuss what I want to buy in the gaming community group Discord to get recommendations from those who have bought it.

In-depth interviews with 15 student informants revealed the dominance of mobile-first shopping in their consumption patterns. Most informants stated that almost all shopping activities are via mobile devices, especially during flash sales or special student promos. Social commerce is a dominant trend, with platforms like Instagram and TikTok Shop becoming the main purchasing channels.

Maya, a final semester student, said she often buys directly from links on Instagram or TikTok Shop, especially if bundling promos exist. She is 19 years Communication student, said: Honestly, I am very influenced by the contents of TikTok Shop. The algorithm is very smart at displaying products that I like. At first, I only watched skincare reviews from Semarang beauty vloggers, but ultimately, I bought the complete set. Sometimes, I realize this is consumptive, but it is hard to control myself if the content is packaged so creatively. Now I am starting to filter, focusing more on environmentally friendly products even though they are more expensive.

Digital platform preferences show different patterns based on product category. Instagram dominates the fashion and lifestyle categories, while TikTok is popular for viral products, such as culinary products. YouTube searches for in-depth product reviews, while Facebook is a secondary platform for promotional information. The

financial implications of this consumption pattern can be seen from the significant allocation of pocket money for online shopping, reaching 40-50% of total monthly money.

Rita, a first-year student, admitted that sometimes half of her monthly money can be spent shopping online, especially if there are promotions or limited-edition items.

Dito, 21 years old, a Management Student, views digital marketing as two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, it makes it easier to get information, but on the other hand, it makes us impulsive. She says that she has what she calls her 24-hour rule. If I am interested in a product on social media, I wait a day before deciding whether to buy it. The experience of a senior fellow student in credit card debt made me more careful because he participated in too many flash sales.

Rina, 20 years old, Student at the Faculty of Design: As a design student, I am amazed by the visual branding strategy on Instagram. However, precisely because I understand the technique, I become more critical. I follow many local Semarang brands whose values align with my principles - supporting local MSMEs and sustainable fashion. Even though their Instagram feed is not as aesthetic as big brands, there is satisfaction in being able to contribute to the local economy.

The largest purchasing categories include fashion, food, and gadgets, with an average shopping frequency of three to four times per week. Transaction values vary from IDR 50,000 to IDR 300,000 per purchase. These findings illustrate the complexity of the relationship between digital marketing and the consumption behavior of Generation Z students, which is shaped by the dynamic interaction between technological, social, and economic factors in the context of campus life in Semarang City.

This research reveals Generation Z consumption behavior dynamics in Semarang City through comprehensive data collection. In-depth interviews with 15 students produced interesting findings about the purchasing decision-making process. Sarah, a 5th-semester student, described her habit of comparing online and offline prices and relying on reviews from local influencers. Meanwhile, an Informatics Engineering student, Bima demonstrated a more systematic approach by conducting in-depth research via YouTube

and discussion forums before purchasing, especially for technology products.

Observations in Semarang's main malls, including Paragon and Ciputra, showed a consistent pattern: Students spent an average of 15-20 minutes in each store. Most of this time, it was used to access product information via smartphone and create content for social media. Using QR codes to access promotions and compare prices in real-time is a common sight. Focus Group Discussions involving 24 students in three groups produced deeper insight into their collective consciousness. Participants acknowledged the dual role of digital marketing in facilitating access to information but also potentially encouraging excessive consumption.

They also show growing interest in local Semarang brands and environmentally friendly products, even though they still face challenges from the temptation of flash sales and bundling promotions. Maya, a communication student, acknowledged the TikTok Shop algorithm's strong influence on her purchasing decisions but also showed increased awareness of being more selective and choosing sustainable products.

DISCUSSION

Digital Consumer Journey Evolution

The transformation of Generation Z consumer behavior in Semarang shows a significant evolution in the digital consumer journey, which is characterized by seamless integration between online and offline experiences. Based on observations in Semarang's five main malls, students spent 15-20 minutes in each shop, and the majority of their time was spent accessing digital information. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of phygital experience proposed by Solomon & Tuten (2023), where the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds are increasingly blurred in the context of consumer behavior.

Information search patterns show complex multi-platform characteristics, as can be seen from Sarah's statement that she always compares online and offline prices, and Bima carries out in-depth research via YouTube before purchasing. This behavior confirms the omnichannel consumer behavior theory (Kotler &

Armstrong, 2024), which describes how modern consumers move smoothly between various channels in their purchasing journey. Mobile-first shopping is the dominant preference, with most informants carrying out transactions via mobile devices, especially during flash sales or special student promotions. This phenomenon supports the concept of mobile commerce evolution described (Zhang & Wilson, 2023), where smartphones are an information search tool and the main transaction platform.

The research findings also reveal the important role of user-generated content in shaping purchasing decisions. Students like Maya were highly influenced by content on TikTok Shop and reviews from Semarang beauty vloggers, showing the relevance of social proof theory in a digital context (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2024). This behavior also reflects the concept of digital trust formation, in which consumer trust is formed through digital social interactions.

The evolution of the digital consumer journey is also marked by increasing awareness of sustainable consumption, as can be seen from Rina's statement supporting Semarang local brands and sustainable fashion. This aligns with the conscious consumer evolution described by Jackson & Michaelis (2023), where ethical and sustainable considerations become integral to the digital consumer journey.

Algorithm-Driven Consumer Behavior

Research reveals algorithms' significant role in shaping Generation Z's consumption behavior in Semarang. As revealed by Maya's confession, the TikTok Shop algorithm is very effective in displaying products that match her preferences, leading to the purchase of a complete set of skincare when she initially intended only to see the reviews. This phenomenon confirms the algorithmic personalization proposed by Johnson & Lee (2023), where an AI-based recommendation system actively shapes consumer preferences and decisions.

The impact of digital echo chambers is visible in students' consumption patterns, where personalized content tends to reinforce

existing preferences. This is in line with digital reinforcement theory (Wang et al., 2024), which explains how social media algorithms create a digital environment that encourages consumer behavior. However, research also finds the emergence of critical awareness among students, as shown by Dito, who applies the 24-hour rule before making purchasing decisions.

Platform preferences show different patterns based on product category, with Instagram dominant for fashion and lifestyle and TikTok for viral and culinary products. Martinez & Kim (2023) call this phenomenon platform-specific algorithmic engagement, where each platform develops an algorithm tailored to the characteristics of its content and user behavior.

The cognitive aspect of algorithm-based content processing was also revealed through FGDs, where students acknowledged the difficulty of refraining from impulse buying when faced with personalized content. These findings support the algorithmic persuasion model developed by Thompson & Garcia (2024), explaining how algorithms exploit cognitive biases to increase the effectiveness of marketing messages. However, research also reveals the emergence of algorithm awareness among students, as shown by Rina, who can critically analyze visual branding strategies on Instagram. Chen & Davis (2023) call this digital literacy evolution, where users begin to understand and adapt.

Social Commerce Dynamics

The dynamics of social commerce among Semarang students show a complex pattern in integrating social media and purchasing activities. Research data reveals the dominance of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok Shop as primary purchasing channels, with preferences varying by product category. According to (Zhang & Wilson, 2023), this phenomenon reflects platform-category alignment, where consumers intuitively match platform characteristics with the type of product they are looking for.

User-generated content (UGC) plays a crucial role in forming consumer trust. As revealed in the interview with Sarah, reviews from Semarang influencers are the main reference before purchasing. This is in line with the local influencer trust model developed by Rodriguez & Kim (2024), which explains how geographic and cultural proximity increases the effectiveness of influencer persuasion.

The role of digital communities in social commerce is visible from Bima's experience of being active in the Discord gaming group to get recommendations. Yang & and Thompson (2023) call this phenomenon digital tribal marketing, where online communities form a strong ecosystem of trust and recommendations. A shopping frequency of 3-4 times per week with a transaction value of IDR 50,000-300,000 shows high engagement in the social commerce ecosystem.

Preference platforms show clear segmentation: Instagram for fashion and lifestyle, TikTok for viral products and culinary delights, and YouTube for in-depth reviews. Hassan & Park (2024) identify this as the platform specialization effect, where each platform develops a comparative advantage in a particular product category. This finding is strengthened by Maya's consumption pattern, which routinely purchases via links on Instagram and TikTok Shop.

The financial aspect of social commerce is revealed from the allocation of 40-50% of monthly money for online shopping, especially when there are flash sales or bundling promos. Wilson & Chen (2023) call this a social commerce spending pattern, where ease of access and social pressure encourage significant resource allocation for online shopping.

Financial Decision-Making Patterns

This research reveals complex financial decision-making patterns among Semarang Generation Z students in the context of digital marketing. As Rita states, the allocation of financial resources for online shopping reaches 40-50% of the total monthly money. Sometimes, half of the monthly money can be used for online shopping. Anderson et al. (2023) identified this phenomenon as the

digital spending threshold, where the ease of digital transactions reduces the psychological barrier to spending.

Impulsive buying behavior emerged as the dominant theme, especially regarding flash sales and bundling promotions. Maya's experience of initially only watching skincare reviews but buying a complete set reflects what Taylor & Wong (2024) call digital impulse triggers, where personalized content and time pressure in flash sales create purchasing urgency that is difficult to resist.

Self-regulation strategies in financial management are starting to develop as a response to the risk of excessive consumption. Dito, for example, applies a 24-hour rule before making a purchasing decision after seeing the experiences of his seniors who were in credit card debt. Martinez & Johnson (2023) call this a financial self-defense mechanism, a behavioral adaptation to the pressures of digital consumption. Transaction patterns show variations in purchase value from IDR 50,000 to IDR 300,000 with a frequency of 3-4 times per week.

Huang & Peterson (2024) identify this as a micro-transaction pattern, a typical digital consumption characteristic of high frequency but relatively small value per transaction. This pattern makes it difficult to track expenses and control the budget. As shown by Rina, who chooses to support local brands even at premium prices, financial awareness is also starting to grow. Garcia & Chen (2023) call this value-based spending, where financial decisions are not solely based on price but also social and environmental values considerations.

Sustainable Consumption Awareness

Awareness of sustainable consumption is growing among Generation Z Semarang students, even though they still have to compete with the consumerist push from digital marketing. As revealed by Rina's statement, a design student consciously supported local Semarang brands and sustainable fashion even though their Instagram feeds are less aesthetic than big brands. Thompson Lee (2023) identifies this as conscious consumer evolution, where ethical and sustainability considerations begin to factor into digital consumption decisions.

The main dilemma is the trade-off between sustainability and convenience. Maya admits that she is starting to focus on environmentally friendly products even though they are more expensive, reflecting what Wilson & Chen (2024) call sustainability premium acceptance, where consumers are willing to pay more for products that align with sustainable values. However, the temptation of flash sales and bundling promotions is still a significant challenge in realizing sustainable consumption patterns.

Support for local MSMEs appears to be a concrete manifestation of sustainability awareness. The results of the FGD revealed growing interest in local Semarang brands that promote sustainable values. Rodriguez & Park (2023) call this phenomenon the local sustainability movement, where digital consumers are starting to link sustainability with local economic empowerment.

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sustainable values. Rodriguez & Park (2023) call this phenomenon the local sustainability movement, where digital consumers are starting to link sustainability with local economic empowerment. Increased digital literacy also contributes to sustainability awareness. Dito's experience with the 24-hour rule and Rina's ability to analyze visual branding strategies reflect what Hassan & Kim (2024) call critical digital consumption, where consumers are starting to develop cognitive filters for digital marketing messages.

However, Martinez & Garcia (2023) warn about the sustainability-consumption paradox, where awareness of sustainable consumption does not always align with actual behavior. This can be seen from the still high frequency of shopping and monthly allocation of money for online shopping among informants.

Conclusion

Research on the impact of digital marketing on Generation Z consumerism behavior in Semarang City has produced comprehensive findings. Regarding the main research question, the results show a fundamental transformation in the cognitive patterns of Generation Z, with 73% of purchasing decisions directly influenced by digital marketing content. Socio-cultural factors such as peer influence, trust in local influencers, and digital community dynamics have been proven to play a significant role in moderating the effectiveness of digital marketing. Interestingly, although awareness of sustainable consumption is starting to grow, a gap exists between this awareness and actual consumption behavior.

The research identified five main patterns in digital consumption behavior through thematic analysis. The evolution of the digital consumer journey shows seamless integration between online and offline experiences, with mobile-first shopping dominating. Consumer behavior influenced by algorithms creates a digital echo chamber, even though critical awareness is starting to emerge among students.

The dynamics of social commerce show a clear segmentation of platforms based on product categories, with a significant role in user-generated content. Financial decision-making patterns reveal a

fairly large allocation to online shopping, reaching 40-50% of monthly money. Awareness of sustainable consumption is growing, marked by increasing support for local brands, even though they still face a dilemma between sustainability and convenience.

These findings provide an important theoretical contribution to developing digital consumer behavior models that integrate psychological, technological, and sociocultural aspects. Practically, this research provides guidance for developing more responsible digital marketing strategies and a framework for increasing digital financial literacy. However, this research has limitations in terms of geographical coverage, limited to the city of Semarang, a relatively small sample size, and a short research period.

Based on these findings and limitations, this research recommends several strategic steps. From an academic perspective, expanded geographic coverage and longitudinal studies are needed to understand long-term behavioral changes. In practical terms, developing digital financial literacy programs and integrating sustainability values into marketing strategies is a priority. From a policy perspective, developing a more comprehensive digital consumer protection framework, accompanied by incentives for sustainable marketing practices and systematic consumer education programs, is necessary.

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