

Exploration The Role of Social Media in Shaping Social Perceptionsof Local Brands in Indonesia: A Qualitative Study of Generation Z

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of social media in shaping social perceptions toward local brands in Indonesia among Generation Z. In the digital era, social media platforms have become dominant spaces where social interaction influences consumer attitudes and brand image formation. This research applies a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of Generation Z in interpreting and responding to local brand content on social media. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with selected informants aged 18–24 years who actively use social media. The findings reveal that social media shapes social perception through peer interaction, influencer credibility, user-generated content, and symbolic representation of identity. Local brands that successfully build emotional engagement and social relevance tend to gain stronger trust and loyalty. The study highlights that social perception is socially constructed through digital interaction rather than purely formed by traditional advertising exposure. These findings contribute to social marketing literature, particularly in understanding the intersection between social interaction and brand perception in emerging markets.

Keywords: social media, social perception, local brand, Generation Z, qualitative research

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes to the patterns of social interaction among global communities, including in Indonesia. Social media now functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a digital public space where opinions, values, and collective perceptions are formed. This transformation has also influenced modern marketing practices, where brands no longer simply convey promotional messages, but participate in dynamic social conversations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

In the modern marketing perspective, marketing is understood as a social process that involves the creation, communication, and exchange of value between individuals and groups. This concept is emphasized by Philip Kotler, who states that marketing is not only oriented towards economic transactions, but also social relationships that shape consumer perceptions

(Kotler & Keller, 2016). Thus, the formation of a brand image is greatly influenced by the dynamics of social interactions that occur in society.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have become the main space for Generation Z to obtain information and form opinions about a product. This generation is known as digital natives who have a high level of digital literacy and a strong tendency to rely on social validation before making purchasing decisions (Priporas et al., 2017). Interactions in the form of comments, likes, shares, and user-generated content are an important part of in shaping social perceptions of brands.

Social perceptions of brands are not formed individually, but rather through a process of social construction. The theory of social construction proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann explains that social reality is constructed through repeated interactions that produce collective meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the digital context, social media acts as an arena for the construction of new realities, where public opinion about brands is openly negotiated.

The phenomena of social proof and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) further strengthen the role of social media in shaping consumer perceptions. Individuals tend to follow the majority opinion when faced with uncertainty in choosing a product (Cialdini, 2009). Previous studies show that online reviews and influencer recommendations have a significant influence on brand image formation and purchase intention (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In the Indonesian context, the growth of local brands has increased significantly in recent years. Local brands not only compete in terms of product quality, but also build social narratives such as nationalism, sustainability, and local economic empowerment. Generation Z often interprets the use of local brands as a form of social identity and support for domestic products, in line with the Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to understand the subjective experiences of Generation Z in interpreting their interactions with local brands on social media. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it aims to explore the meaning of individuals' lived experiences of a social phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

The research informants consisted of 10 Generation Z individuals aged 18–24 who met the following criteria:

1. Actively use social media for at least 3 hours per day
2. Follow at least five local brand accounts on Instagram or TikTok
3. Have purchased local brand products in the past year

The informant selection technique used purposive sampling to ensure that participants had experiences relevant to the research focus.

Data was collected through the following techniques:

1. In-depth interviews

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow for broad exploration of the informants' experiences and perceptions.

2. Digital observation

The researcher observed the informants' interactions with local brand content on social media, including comments, likes, and other forms of participation.

3. Documentation

Screenshots of brand content, reviews, and user interactions were used as supporting data.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages:

1. Interview transcription
2. Open coding to identify initial themes
3. Axial coding to connect categories
4. Selective coding to find

The analysis process was conducted thematically to identify patterns of meaning that emerged from the informants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. RESULT

Repeated exposure to local brand content on social media has been shown to influence the formation of informants' initial perceptions. Most informants stated that they became familiar with local brands through content that continuously appeared on their Instagram and TikTok homepages. This phenomenon is in line with the mere exposure effect concept, which states that the more often individuals are exposed to a stimulus, the more positive their attitude toward that stimulus will be (Zajonc, 1968). In the digital context, social media algorithms reinforce this effect by tailoring content based on user preferences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social interactions in comment sections are an important space for shaping collective opinions about local brands. Informants admitted to reading other users' comments before making a purchase. This shows that social perceptions are formed through a process of collective social evaluation, rather than individually. These findings are in line with social construction theory, which explains that reality is constructed through social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

In addition, the number of likes, shares, and views is considered an indicator of product quality. Social validation in the form of digital metrics creates the perception that the brand has

been accepted by many people. This concept is known as social proof, where individuals tend to follow the behavior of the majority in situations of uncertainty (Cialdini, 2009).

The role of influencers as digital opinion leaders was also a dominant finding. Informants stated that influencers' recommendations are more trusted than traditional advertising. This is in line with the two-step flow of communication theory, which states that public opinion is often mediated by opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The credibility of influencers, who are considered authentic, strengthens trust in brands.

User-generated content (UGC) was found to be an important factor in building the legitimacy of local brands. Informants trust the experiences of other users more than the official promotional claims of companies. This finding supports previous research stating that UGC increases consumer trust and engagement because it is considered more authentic (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Local brands are also perceived as symbols of social identity. Several informants expressed pride in using local brands as a form of support for domestic products. This perspective can be explained through Social Identity Theory, which states that individuals construct their identity through membership in certain social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In addition to identity aspects, the visual aesthetics and storytelling of brands on social media also shape social perceptions. Informants tend to associate brand quality with visual consistency and the narrative of values conveyed. This is in line with the concept of brand image, which emphasizes the importance of symbolic associations in shaping consumer perceptions (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Viral content on TikTok or Instagram accelerates the formation of social perceptions through the bandwagon effect. Informants consider viral brands to be high-quality brands because they are assumed to have been validated by many people. This phenomenon is consistent with the theory of diffusion of innovation, which explains how information spreads and is collectively adopted in society (Rogers, 2003).

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that social media functions as an arena for social construction in the formation of perceptions of local brands. These perceptions are not formed through one-way communication, but through dynamic interactions between users. This reinforces the view that marketing is a social process, as stated by Philip Kotler (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

The process of social perception construction found in this study is in line with Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of social reality, which states that meaning is formed through repeated social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social media provides a

digital space where the processes of externalization and internalization of brand meaning occur simultaneously.

The dominance of influencers as mediators of perception indicates the existence of a symbolic power structure in the digital space. Influencers have high social capital that allows them to influence collective opinion. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of social capital, which emphasizes the importance of networks and trust in shaping social behavior (Bourdieu, 1986).

Findings regarding the role of UGC and horizontal communication indicate a paradigm shift from traditional marketing to participatory marketing. Consumers are no longer passive objects, but active actors in creating and disseminating brand meaning. This is in line with the development of the concept of interactive digital marketing (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

From a social identity perspective, the use of local brands reflects Generation Z's need to build a collective identity and demonstrate certain social values. Brands become symbols of self-representation and group affiliation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, purchasing decisions are not only based on product functionality, but also on their symbolic meaning.

Viral and bandwagon effects show that social perceptions can change rapidly in the digital ecosystem. When a brand becomes a trend, perceptions of quality increase collectively. This shows that digital social dynamics play a central role in shaping brand reputation (Rogers, 2003).

Practically, these findings imply that local brands need to develop strategies based on social interaction, encourage user participation, and build strong digital communities. This strategy is more effective than a one-way promotional approach because it is in line with the characteristics of Generation Z, which prioritizes authenticity and social connectivity.

Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on the relationship between social construction and digital marketing in the context of developing countries. Social media is not only a channel for distributing information, but also a space for shaping social reality that determines the image and legitimacy of local brands.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the role of social media in shaping social perceptions of local brands in Indonesia among Generation Z. Based on the results of phenomenological analysis, it can be concluded that perceptions of local brands are not formed individually and rationally alone, but rather through a process of social construction that takes place in the digital space.

Social media functions as an arena for social interaction where opinions, experiences, and collective validation shape brand image. Repeated exposure to content, interactions in comment sections, user-generated content, and the role of influencers as digital opinion leaders are key factors in building the social legitimacy of local brands. Perceptions of quality and trust no longer depend solely on official corporate communications but are increasingly determined by horizontal communication between users.

Furthermore, local brands are interpreted as symbols of social identity by Generation Z. The use of local brands not only reflects product preferences but also represents social values such as nationalism, sustainability, and support for the domestic economy. This shows that consumption decisions have strong symbolic and collective dimensions. Theoretically, this research reinforces the relevance of social construction theory and Social Identity Theory in understanding the dynamics of digital marketing. Practically, these findings imply that local brands need to develop communication strategies.

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