

**FROM EXCLUSIVITY TO ATTACHMENT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF IPHONE'S  
MEANING IN GENERATION Z'S SELF-PRESENTATION PRACTICES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the symbolic meaning of the iPhone beyond its functional technological dimensions, particularly in the self-presentation practices of selected Indonesian Generation Z users. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this exploratory study aims to understand how meanings are constructed through personal experiences and social interactions. Smartphones, and the iPhone in particular, are no longer regarded merely as communication tools but have been transformed into cultural artefacts that carry meanings of identity, social status, and self-expression. Using a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, this research explores the experiences and perceptions of two female iPhone users representing two distinct patterns: a user with strong emotional attachment and brand identity, and a user who re-evaluates her choice on functional-rational grounds. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, anchored in Goffman's impression management theory, Veblen's conspicuous consumption, Belk's extended self theory, and Blumer's symbolic interactionism. The findings reveal that the iPhone functions as a caste marker within the digital social hierarchy of Gen Z, where ownership is closely tied to exclusivity, social acceptance, and identity construction. The study identifies a shift in meaning from exclusivity grounded in financial accessibility toward brand loyalty rooted in emotional attachment, in line with changing market conditions and the widening penetration of the iPhone across economic segments. At the same time, a form of functional resistance emerges from within the user community itself, reflecting a critical awareness of the symbolic construction embedded in the product. These findings enrich theoretical understandings of Goffman's dramaturgical model in the digital era and offer practical implications for brand communication strategists.*

*Keywords: iPhone; Generation Z; self-presentation; status symbol; brand attachment.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Almost everyone living in the contemporary era is familiar with the smartphone. Its presence in everyday life is no longer something remarkable: it has become an inseparable part of the routines of modern human beings, from the moment of waking until the approach of nightly rest. At its foundation, the smartphone is a communication device designed to connect one individual with another, transcending the boundaries of geography and time. Its simple basic functions, such as making calls and sending messages, have now grown into a complex digital ecosystem encompassing social, economic, and entertainment activities, as well as the formation of self-identity.

However, along with the rapid development of technology and the shifting landscape of digital culture, the function and presence of the smartphone can no longer be understood merely as a communication tool. This shift in meaning is deeply significant, particularly among Generation Z, the demographic group born between 1997 and 2012 Dimock (2019) and raised within the embrace of the internet and social media. Data from GWI (2023) indicate that more than 98% of Gen Z in Southeast Asia access the internet through smartphones, with Indonesia among the largest internet user bases in the world, exceeding 204 million internet users (APJII, 2024). These conditions position the smartphone and its brand as central elements in the construction of identity and the social life of this generation.

For Generation Z, the smartphone has become something far more personal and symbolic: a reflection of identity, a marker of social position, and, at once, an instrument of existence within the digital public sphere. This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of digital self-presentation put forward by Marwick & Boyd (2011), in which individuals actively manage their self-image through digital platforms while taking a heterogeneous audience into account. Generation Z does not merely use smartphones; its members speak through them, not simply with words but through the brand, model, and aesthetics of the devices they hold.

It is within this context that particular smartphone brands and types begin to acquire symbolic weight that exceeds their functional value. Across social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, a recurring pattern is evident: posts featuring the Dynamic Island, a ProMax camera, or simply a screenshot marked "Delivered" from iMessage become unwritten markers of who a person is in the eyes of their peers. Apple has consistently constructed a narrative of exclusivity through marketing strategies that target the aspirations of young groups (Kahney, 2019; Malhotra, 2019). The iPhone, within this framework, serves as a proxy for social validation—a material object that represents an intangible form of social recognition.

Research on the digital consumptive behavior of Gen Z has been conducted extensively (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Phuong et al., 2021; Twenge & Campbell, 2019). However, research that specifically traces the subjective experience and the personally constructed meaning of the iPhone as an instrument of social validation within the Indonesian cultural context remains very limited. The distinctiveness of the Indonesian context lies in the fusion of strong status-based social pressure grounded in economic standing with norms of collectivism that shape the dynamics of group acceptance and rejection (Hofstede, 2001; Mulder, 2005). This study is present to fill that gap.

This study aims to understand how Indonesian Gen Z make sense of the iPhone as an instrument of social validation and identity; to analyze how such meaning is constructed and shifts through everyday social interaction; and to explore the dynamics of functional resistance among users who question the brand's symbolic value. Through a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews, this research seeks to uncover the layers of meaning hidden behind a seemingly simple technological choice that nonetheless holds rich social and psychological complexity.

### **Self-Presentation Theory: Goffman's Dramaturgical Approach**

Goffman (1959) laid the foundation for the understanding that social life is a stage on which individuals present a strategically constructed self to a particular audience. Within this framework, the individual acts much like a performer who manages impressions through appearance, stage properties, and interaction with the audience. This concept, originally formulated in the context of face-to-face encounters, has undergone significant elaboration in the digital context (Hogan, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010; Zhao et al., 2008).

Meyrowitz (1985) extended Goffman's theory by showing how electronic media blur the boundary between front stage and back stage. In the context of Gen Z social media, Instagram and TikTok function as a carefully designed front stage, in which every element, including the device used to produce content, becomes part of strategic impression management. Pearson (2009) adds that

identity within the digital environment is performative and can be dynamically modified according to the audience context.

### **Symbolic Consumption and Conspicuous Consumption**

Veblen (2009) introduced the concept of conspicuous consumption as a practice in which individuals consume goods not merely for their use value but to demonstrate social status to others. This concept, though developed in the nineteenth century, remains relevant, indeed more complex within the contemporary digital context. Mason (1981) developed Veblen's framework to explain how positional goods maintain their symbolic value through socially constructed exclusivity.

Baudrillard (1981) and Baudrillard & Gallimard (1977) deepened this analysis by arguing that modern consumer society consumes signs and symbols rather than merely objects with use-value. In his system, objects possess four dimensions of value: use value, exchange value, sign value, and symbolic value. The iPhone, with its iconic Apple logo, operates primarily as a sign value that exceeds its use value (Holt, 2004; Toffoletti & Mewett, 2014).

### **Extended Self and Brand Attachment in the Digital Ecosystem**

Belk (1988) asserted that individuals define themselves through the possession of objects. This concept of the extended self explains how material objects and, in later developments, digital objects become an extension of the user's self-identity. Belk (2013) updated this concept in the digital context, arguing that digital objects do not merely represent the self but become part of a dynamically constructed and displayed self within virtual space. From a marketing standpoint, brand attachment is defined by Whan Park et al. (2010) as the strength of the bond connecting a brand with the consumer's self. This attachment involves brand-self connection and brand prominence. Through an integrated ecosystem strategy comprising the iPhone, Mac, iPad, AirPods, and iCloud, Apple systematically builds both hardware and software components (Kahney, 2019; Moorman, 2018).

### **Generation Z, Digital Visual Culture, and Social Capital**

Generation Z is known as a cohort of digital natives who grew up with visually based social media as their primary habitat (Prensky, 2001; Twenge, 2017). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z experienced socialization that was intensively mediated by digital technology from childhood, shaping how its members understand identity, social relationships, and self-validation (Boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2015). Berger (2016) concept of social currency is relevant here: individuals share and consume content that makes them appear attractive, intelligent, or of refined taste in the eyes of their social group. Within the attention economy of social media (Wu, 2017), the device used to produce visual content also bears a symbolic burden inseparable from the content's value. Research by Zhang et al. (2019) confirms that among young Asian users, smartphone brands significantly influence perceptions of social status and acceptability within peer groups.

### **Symbolic Interactionism and the Construction of Meaning**

Blumer (1986) formulated three core premises of symbolic interactionism: human beings act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to them; meaning arises from social interaction; and meaning is modified through an interpretive process undertaken by the individual in dealing with the things encountered. In the context of this study, the iPhone is not merely an object with certain technical specifications but an entity that acquires its meaning through repeated social interaction and is continually reinterpreted. Mead et al. (2015) add that an object acquires its meaning through the social responses it elicits rather than through its intrinsic properties.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study adopts an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach. The interpretive paradigm was chosen because this research aims to understand social reality from the perspective of the research subjects rather than to measure or generalize it statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The qualitative approach enables the excavation of meaning, experience, and complex interpretive processes that cannot be captured by quantitative instruments (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing informants to express subjective experiences freely while enabling the researcher to steer the conversation in line with the research focus (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide was structured around the principal theoretical themes yet remained open to permit the exploration of themes that emerged organically from the informants' narratives.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in settings comfortable for the informants, with each session lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the informants’ consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy.

Informants were purposively selected based on the following criteria: belonging to Generation Z, being an active iPhone user, and having an active Instagram and/or TikTok account. The selection of two informants with contrasting profiles, namely a loyal user and a user considering a switch, was intended to provide analytical contrast within this exploratory study (Patton, 2015). Given the limited number of participants, the findings are interpreted as contextual insights rather than representative patterns of all Indonesian Generation Z users.

**Table 1. Profiles of the Research Informants**

| Aspect            | Informant 1 (Putri)         | Informant 2 (Sagita)                  |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Age               | 24 years                    | 22 years                              |
| Gender            | Female                      | Female                                |
| Education         | Bachelor’s in Communication | Bachelor’s in Public Relations        |
| Domicile          | Jakarta                     | Jakarta                               |
| iPhone user since | 2016 (± 8 years)            | 2023 (± 1 year)                       |
| Main platforms    | Instagram, TikTok           | Instagram, LinkedIn                   |
| User type         | Loyal user / brand-attached | Functional user / symbolic resistance |

Data analysis employed the inductive-deductive thematic analysis approach developed by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019). The analytical process followed six phases: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts, the assignment of initial codes, the search for themes, the review of themes, the defining and naming of themes, and the writing of the report. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through source triangulation and member checking, in which the preliminary findings were reconfirmed with the informants. This study complied with the applicable principles of research ethics. The identities of the informants were partially disguised in accordance with their request and consent. Informed consent was obtained in writing before the interviews. The informants held the right to withdraw from participation at any time without any consequence.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**The iPhone as a Caste Marker: The Construction of a Digital Social Hierarchy**

The first finding shows that the informants’ relationship with the iPhone was never purely functional from the outset. Putri revealed that her initial desire to own an iPhone stemmed from a wish to join a circle of friends perceived as having higher social status. Exclusivity became the primary attraction:

*At that time, in 2015, I remember it very clearly. So when I found out that Apple products were exclusive, when someone used an iPhone in particular. It was as if their status and level were different. They seemed untouchable, of a different caste. (Informant 1, Putri)*

This narrative aligns with Veblen’s (2009) argument concerning conspicuous consumption: owning an iPhone at that time was a public signal of economic capacity and social acceptance. Putri’s use of the caste metaphor indicates an internalization of a social hierarchy grounded in the possession of goods, experienced as natural and legitimate rather than as a debatable social construction. Within Indonesia’s collectivist culture (Hofstede, 2001; Mulder, 2005), the pressure to own a socially accepted product carries a powerful psychological burden.

**The Shift from Exclusivity to Emotional Attachment**

The next intriguing finding is the erosion of the meaning of exclusivity over time as the iPhone penetrated various economic segments. Putri acknowledged that the iPhone is no longer an exclusive marker because it is now owned on a massive scale, including by those who must strain themselves financially to acquire it. However, rather than switching to another brand, she instead internalized a deeper form of bond: brand attachment grounded in emotional connection.

*So it is as if there is already an attachment between the iPhone and me; if I were to change phones, it would be like starting a new relationship. Like beginning a new relationship with someone. (Informant 1, Putri)*

The metaphor of a new relationship reveals an affective dimension of the human–object relationship that exceeds the logic of rational consumption. This reflects the extended self (Belk, 1988, 2013), for the iPhone has become part of a self-identity that is not easily relinquished. Whan

Park et al. (2010) explain this phenomenon as a strong brand-self connection, in which the brand and the consumer's self are psychologically closely linked.

### **Self-Presentation on the Digital Stage: The iPhone as a Stage Property**

The second finding concerns the iPhone's role on social media as a stage for self-presentation. Both informants independently identified camera quality, particularly for Instagram content, as a key reason for retaining the iPhone.

*Actually, the reason I still stick with the iPhone is that social media, especially Instagram, is in HD, right? It is good for the stories, for the posts. That is what keeps me holding on. (Informant 1, Putri)*

Within Goffman's (1959) framework, Instagram is the front stage for Generation Z. The visual quality of the content published forms part of a careful management of impressions. The iPhone, with its reputation for consistent photographic and video quality, becomes a reliable tool for producing a digital self-image. Sagita, although her initial motivation was more functional, still operates within a social ecosystem in which the symbolic attribution of the iPhone applies, and a need for a quality camera in public relations work persists.

### **Functional Resistance and the Deconstruction of the Brand Myth**

The third finding reveals a more complex dynamic: resistance to the symbolic construction of the iPhone that arises not from without but from within the community of its own users. Sagita represents the type of user who consciously deconstructs the iPhone myth.

*There is no meaningful change that makes me think, oh, what is really being sold here is just the brand. If it is said to be exclusive, it does not seem exclusive now because loads of ordinary people use it. (Informant 2, Sagita)*

Dissatisfaction with the stagnation of innovation, the limitations of interface customization, and battery inefficiency became points of friction that prompted a re-evaluation. Interestingly, Sagita nonetheless retained her iPhone not out of a conviction of its superiority, but because she had not yet found a compelling justification to switch. This indicates the role of status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) alongside technical and social factors.

Meanwhile, Putri explicitly refused to switch to Android even when offered a device at a higher price and with higher specifications. The choice of the word "return," rather than "switch," in Putri's narrative reproduces the hierarchy between iPhone and Android as natural and permanent. Moving to Android, in Putri's perception, is not merely a technical decision but a form of downward mobility within a consumption-based social ladder.

### **Synthesis of Findings: A Framework for the Transformation of iPhone's Meaning**

Based on the analysis above, this study identifies a trajectory of the iPhone's meaning across three phases. The first phase is aspirational exclusivity in the early 2010s, when the iPhone served as a status symbol grounded in financial accessibility. The premium price created a barrier to entry, separating the "iPhone class" from other smartphone users.

The second phase is democratization and the crisis of exclusivity in the 2020s. The growing penetration of the iPhone through credit schemes, the refurbished market, and price reductions on older models eroded the exclusivity associated with financial accessibility. The brand faced a paradox of democratization: the more affordable it became, the less power it had to differentiate itself as a caste marker.

The third phase is repositioning toward emotional attachment. In the contemporary phase, the value of the iPhone no longer rests solely on financial exclusivity but on the depth of the ecosystem and emotional attachment. Brand loyalty is no longer built merely upon envy but upon a profound sense of ownership the iPhone as part of an extended self that is difficult to separate from.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study confirms that, for Indonesian Generation Z, the iPhone functions far beyond its capability as a technological device. It is an artifact of identity, a marker of social position, and an instrument of self-presentation within a competitive digital ecosystem. The journey from a caste marker toward deep emotional attachment illustrates how a brand can shift its value proposition from exclusivity grounded in financial accessibility to loyalty grounded in identity, in line with changing market conditions and the ever-widening penetration of the product. Theoretically, this study contributes to three areas. First, it enriches understanding of how Goffman's self-presentation theory operates in the digital era, where props are no longer confined to physical space but also encompass the technological devices that mediate digital life. Second, this research elaborates Belk's concept of the extended self within the context of brand loyalty grounded in emotional attachment rather than mere

possession. Third, this study adds the dimension of Indonesia's collectivist culture to the study of symbolic consumption, a field hitherto dominated by Western perspectives. Practically, these findings offer brand managers and marketing communicators insight into the complexity of Gen Z's consumption motivations, which cannot be reduced to considerations of specification or price alone. Strategies that exploit social anxiety and peer-group pressure need to be reconsidered ethically, especially given the psychological impact they may generate among younger age groups. This study is limited by its small number of informants, namely two participants from Jakarta. Therefore, the findings should be understood as interpretive insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions. Future research should involve participants with greater demographic variation is required to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon. A mixed-methods approach combining in-depth interviews with large-scale surveys, together with comparative research across brands and across cultures, could yield a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of symbolic consumption in the digital era.

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