

(Research Article)

Coffee Consumption as Digital Content: Algorithmic Hyperreality, Symbolic Consumption, and Generation Z Identity Construction

Rinaldi Bursan*

Management Department, University of Lampung; e-mail : rinaldi.bursan@feb.unila.ac.id

*Corresponding Author : rinaldi.bursan@feb.unila.ac.id

Abstract. Coffee drinking has evolved from a primarily functional action into a social practice encompassing content creation, symbolic consumption, and identity building as a result of the digitalization of daily consumption. With an emphasis on the interdependence of digital content, algorithmic hyperreality, symbolic consumption, and consumer identity, this study attempts to investigate how Generation Z creates meanings of coffee consumption through social media. Five members of Generation Z who have visited coffee shops in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, were interviewed in-depth for the study, which uses an interpretive qualitative methodology. Reflexive theme analysis was used to examine the data in order to find patterns of meaning pertaining to algorithmic visibility, digital representation, identity performativity, and consumer agency. The results show that coffee consumption is moving away from the actual act of drinking coffee and toward the creation and dissemination of digital representations. While likes, comments, views, and algorithmically amplified content help to shape social validation and consumption expectations, coffee shops serve as symbolic venues where people curate and communicate their identities. Additionally, participants identified a discrepancy between real-world experiences and digital representations, suggesting the rise of algorithmic hyperreality. But when it comes to algorithmic impact, customers are not totally passive; instead, they use convenience, authenticity, personal preferences, and product quality to negotiate trends and FOMO. By conceiving algorithmic hyperreality as a cyclic process that links representation, algorithmic visibility, identity building, and subsequent consumption, this study advances consumer culture research.

Keywords: Algorithmic Hyperreality; Consumer Identity; Generation Z; Social Media; Symbolic Consumption.

Received: March 24, 2026;
Revised: May 24, 2026
Accepted: July 20, 2026;
Published: September 24, 2026
Curr. Ver.: September 24, 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY SA) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

The digitalization of everyday consumption has transformed consumption from a primarily functional activity into a social and communicative practice involving content production, symbolic meaning, and identity construction. Consumers can now transform their experiences into photos, videos, reviews, stories, and other digital content that is circulated and consumed by others. Wilska et al. (2023) show that social media plays an important role in young consumers' identity formation, as consumption styles function not only to satisfy needs but also to express who they are and how they wish to be perceived. Thus, understanding digital consumption requires attention not only to what is consumed but also to how consumption is represented and what identities are constructed through these representations.

These dynamics are particularly relevant to Generation Z, who have grown up in an environment deeply integrated with digital media. Social media functions not only as a source of information but also as a space for self-presentation, social interaction, trend participation, and identity expression. Wilska et al. (2023) indicate that young consumers' identities are increasingly influenced by social media and commercial content, while Herawati et al. (2022) show that social media use is closely associated with Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) among

Generation Z. Continuous exposure to others' activities and consumption experiences can therefore shape perceptions of what is attractive, relevant, and worth following.

These dynamics are particularly visible in coffee shop consumption. Coffee shops have evolved beyond places for drinking coffee into spaces for social interaction, recreation, life-style expression, and identity representation. Hawa et al. (2023) found that coffee-drinking activities among university students can contribute to group identity construction, while recent research on Generation Z coffee shop culture suggests that cafés can function as symbolic spaces where individuals produce and communicate self-images through aesthetics and social media. Coffee consumption can therefore be understood as symbolic consumption, in which its value extends beyond functional benefits to include social meanings and personal identity. Visiting a coffee shop, documenting the experience, and sharing it online can thus transform having coffee into a cultural practice connecting consumption and digital self-representation.

The connection between physical consumption and digital representation also provides a basis for understanding coffee shop consumption through hyperreality. Consumers who encounter coffee shops through photos, videos, and reviews have already formed expectations through digital representations before experiencing the physical space. These representations can therefore shape subsequent desires and consumption decisions. This process becomes more complex through algorithmic mediation. Airoidi & Rokka (2022) explain that algorithms have become part of consumption culture by mediating relationships between consumers, markets, and platforms, while Lee et al. (2022) show that algorithmic personalization can simultaneously reflect and shape users' preferences and self-understanding. In coffee shop consumption, this may create a recursive cycle in which consumers encounter content, visit coffee shops, produce new content, receive social responses, and contribute to representations consumed by others.

Although research on Generation Z, social media, coffee shops, and identity has expanded, these phenomena have rarely been examined as an interconnected cultural process involving digital content, symbolic consumption, identity construction, hyperreality, and algorithmic mediation. This study addresses this gap by examining how Generation Z's coffee consumption moves from physical experience toward digital content production, how these practices generate symbolic meanings and identity representations, and how algorithmic mediation contributes to hyperreality. The study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with five Generation Z consumers of Tomoro Coffee in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, aged 17-25 and active on at least one social media platform. By interpreting the meanings attached to consumption, content, representation, and identity, this study conceptualizes coffee consumption as a cultural practice connecting experience, symbols, digital content, identity, and algorithms in the construction of an increasingly hyperreal consumption reality.

2. Literature Review

Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Consumption in Digital Environments

By integrating consuming habits into platforms, content, communities, and algorithmic systems that influence how customers find, assess, use, and share goods and services, the digitalization of consumption has completely changed consumer culture. By highlighting the opacity, authority, non-neutrality, and recursivity of algorithms in mediating consumption at the individual, collective, and market levels, Airoidi & Rokka (2022) describe this shift as algorithmic consumer culture. By emphasizing how consumers create identities and meanings through consumption as well as how platforms and algorithms influence the creation and dissemination of such meanings, this viewpoint expands on Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Importantly, algorithmic influence is not necessarily deterministic, as consumers retain agency to interpret, negotiate, and resist platform-driven influences. Thus, algorithmic consumer culture reflects a dialectical relationship between platform control and consumer agency, providing an important framework for understanding how Generation Z navigates consumption within increasingly curated digital environments.

Social Media and the Construction of Consumer Identity among Generation Z

Social media plays a central role in consumer identity formation by enabling individuals to construct, negotiate, and present representations of themselves through consumption and digital interaction. Wilska et al. (2023), based on a qualitative study of 35 adolescents aged 15-19, found that young consumers develop clear perceptions of the consumer identities they embrace or avoid, influenced by commercial content, influencers, and their social media environment. This perspective is particularly relevant to Gen Z coffee consumption, as choosing coffee shops, photographing experiences, sharing them online, and receiving audience

responses can function as forms of identity work. Thus, coffee shops serve not merely as consumption spaces but also as symbolic resources for self-presentation, demonstrating how consumption and identity are increasingly intertwined within digital environments (Wilska et al., 2023).

Symbolic Consumption and Digital Self-Representation

Symbolic consumption becomes increasingly relevant when consumers evaluate products and experiences not only for their functional benefits but also for the social meanings and identities they convey. In digital environments, these symbolic meanings can be visualized, shared, and transformed into content for broader audiences, creating a circular relationship between symbolic consumption and digital content production. This process is particularly relevant to Generation Z, as social media enables consumer identities to be continuously constructed through visual and narrative practices. Wilska et al. (2023) found that social media activities, influencer exposure, and commercial content contribute to the development of consumption styles and consumer identities, which are shaped through ongoing social and reflective processes. Accordingly, sharing coffee shop experiences can function as identity work, as consumers communicate not only what they consume but also who they are, with activities, social interactions, and the atmosphere of a venue serving as symbolic cues associated with particular lifestyles (Wilska et al., 2023).

Algorithmic Mediation of Consumer Culture

Algorithms introduce a new dimension to the relationship between symbolic consumption and digital identity by shaping which consumption-related symbols, lifestyles, and experiences become visible to users. On platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, content is curated and recommended based on behavioral signals, making algorithms important mediators between consumers and markets. Airolidi & Rokka (2022) explain that algorithmic consumer culture operates through a recursive cycle in which consumer behavior generates data, data informs recommendations, and recommendations subsequently influence further consumer behavior. However, consumers do not necessarily respond to algorithmic mediation passively. Voorveld et al. (2024) demonstrate that consumers differ in their awareness, critical evaluation, and ability to cope with algorithmic persuasion in social media advertising. Thus, Gen Z consumers should be viewed not simply as passive recipients of algorithmic influence but as active actors who possess varying levels of awareness and capacity to negotiate algorithmically mediated digital environments (Airolidi & Rokka, 2022; Voorveld et al., 2024).

Algorithmic Mediation, Hyperreality, and the Digital Representation of Consumption

Airolidi & Rokka (2022) provide an important foundation for understanding how algorithms shape contemporary consumption by viewing them as part of the cultural articulation of consumer practices rather than merely as technologies for distributing information. From this perspective, digital hyperreality can be understood through three interconnected layers: consumer-generated representation, platform-mediated visibility, and algorithmically reinforced repetition. Consumers first produce representations of consumption, platforms determine their visibility, and algorithms subsequently reinforce recurring patterns by repeatedly exposing users to similar symbols and experiences. Within this framework, hyperreality does not necessarily imply that digital representations are false or manipulative; rather, representations may precede and shape actual consumption experiences. Digital signs can therefore generate desires for particular lifestyles, places, or experiences, making representation not merely a reflection of reality but a force that contributes to constructing the reality consumers seek to experience (Airolidi & Rokka, 2022).

Generation Z, FOMO, and the Reproduction of Consumption Trends

FOMO provides a psychosocial mechanism linking digital visibility to consumption decisions. Continuous exposure to others' consumption experiences on social media may lead individuals to perceive certain experiences as emerging social norms or trends that should be followed. Within algorithmically mediated environments, this effect can be intensified as recommendation systems repeatedly present content predicted to align with users' interests, making popular consumption practices increasingly visible. Thus, FOMO may arise not only from direct social comparison with friends or peer groups but also from the platform environment that continuously amplifies popular experiences. This perspective is consistent with Airolidi & Rokka's (2022) argument that platform control and consumer responses, including forms of resistance, are closely interconnected within algorithmic consumer culture.

Towards an Integrated Framework of Algorithmic Hyperreality

Existing literature highlights the interconnected roles of social media, consumer identity, symbolic consumption, and algorithms. Wilska et al. (2023) emphasize social media's role in identity formation, while Airoidi & Rokka (2022), Bhandari & Bimo (2023), and Voorveld et al. (2024) demonstrate how algorithms shape consumption, digital trends, and consumer responses. However, the relationship between symbolic consumption, digital content production, identity construction, and algorithmically mediated hyperreality remains insufficiently integrated. This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing algorithmic hyperreality as a process in which consumption experiences become digital representations that are curated and repeatedly amplified by algorithms, thereby shaping consumer expectations, preferences, and identities. In the context of Gen Z coffee consumption, this framework explains how physical experiences at Tomoro Coffee are transformed into digital content, symbolic meanings, and identity representations within an algorithmic environment (Wilska et al., 2023; Airoidi & Rokka, 2022; Bhandari & Bimo, 2023; Voorveld et al., 2024).

3. Method

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative case study design to examine how Generation Z constructs subjective meaning around their coffee consumption within a social media environment integrated with digital content production, symbolic consumption, identity construction, and algorithmic mediation. Tomoro Coffee Bandar Lampung serves as the empirical context due to its role as a physical and digital consumption space that fuses coffee-drinking, social interaction, spatial aesthetics, and digital media practices. Epistemologically rooted in a social constructivist paradigm, where consumption reality is viewed as constructed, contextual, and mediated, this research relies on in-depth interviews with Generation Z consumers who actively utilize both the physical space and products of Tomoro Coffee. Rather than seeking statistical generalizability or testing variable relationships, this qualitative approach interprets informants' subjective narratives as reflective of their digital representations and identity negotiations, employing the concepts of hyperreality and symbolic consumption as interpretive frameworks to decode how consumption meanings are formed and negotiated within digital ecosystems.

Research Context

This study was conducted among Tomoro Coffee consumers in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, intentionally selected for its proximity to the Universitas Lampung campus and its dense demographic of young digital natives, particularly university students. Rather than viewing coffee shops merely as standalone commercial entities, this research conceptualizes Tomoro Coffee as a social and symbolic consumption space where functional, social, and aesthetic practices intersect—ranging from studying and socializing to leisure. Crucially, this empirical setting serves as a vital bridge for observing how consumers experience products and spaces offline and subsequently convert these lived interactions into online digital representations.

Participants and Informant Selection Techniques

Using purposive sampling, this study involved five Generation Z consumers (three females and two males, aged 17–25) selected as active Tomoro Coffee patrons, frequent social media users, and individuals with direct experience in creating or sharing coffee shop content. All participants were university students or young adults present on-site during the study. This cohort was deliberately chosen to capture analytical variations in consumption intensity, spatial aesthetics, coffee orientation, and susceptibility to digital trends or FOMO. To ensure anonymity while maintaining narrative consistency throughout the findings, informants were assigned pseudonymous codes from Informant 1 (I1) to Informant 5 (I5).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted on-site with participant consent and audio-recorded for verbatim transcription. Grounded in the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) guidelines for reporting transparency, the interview guide spanned five core domains: consumption experience and coffee-drinking meanings; camera usage, social media, and content production; symbolic consumption and identity construction; digital representation, FOMO, and hyperreality; and algorithmic influence on consumption choices. The semi-structured format provided a consistent inquiry framework while allowing informants to elaborate on nuanced personal experiences, including responses to social media engagement, spatial identity, and perceptions of digital-

versus-physical realities. Field notes were simultaneously recorded to capture contextual dynamics, environmental characteristics, and non-verbal interactions during the interviews.

Researcher Position and Reflexivity

Operating within an interpretive paradigm, this study positions the researcher as the primary instrument for data production and analysis, recognizing that meanings are co-constructed through interactions between informant narratives, research context, theoretical lenses, and researcher reflexivity. To prevent theoretical over-fitting, concepts such as hyperreality, symbolic consumption, and algorithmic mediation were employed strictly as sensitizing concepts rather than rigid prescriptive frameworks. The researcher maintained continuous reflexivity by clearly separating explicit informant statements from secondary theoretical interpretations, ensuring that thematic patterns natively emerged from participant narratives prior to applying theoretical frameworks.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) following the six-phase framework by Braun & Clarke (2022) to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning. The iterative process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of verbatim transcripts, followed by initial coding of relevant excerpts (e.g., coffee as experience, content production, social validation, FOMO, and algorithmic exposure). These codes were subsequently aggregated to construct candidate themes, which were then reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness, conceptually defined, and ultimately synthesized into a final analytical narrative. This structured, interpretive progression ensured that empirical findings were meaningfully integrated with theoretical frameworks while honoring the reflexive role of the researcher.

Development of Analytical Theme

To bridge empirical data with theoretical contributions, this study employs a two-tiered thematic structure comprising first-order empirical themes-derived directly from informant narratives (e.g., content production, social validation, FOMO, and digital representation)-and second-order conceptual interpretations that connect these practices to symbolic consumption, digital identity, and algorithmic culture. Rather than merely describing surface-level behaviors such as photo-taking or social media usage, the analytical process interrogates why these practices carry subjective meaning, how digital representations influence lived consumption experiences, and how algorithms amplify the circulation of consumption symbols. Ultimately, these empirical themes are integrated theoretically to develop a comprehensive interpretation of algorithmic hyperreality and consumer agency.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Study rigor and credibility were sustained through prolonged data engagement, iterative coding, reflexive memoing, cross-case comparisons, negative-case analysis, and the strategic use of verbatim participant quotations in accordance with COREQ reporting guidelines. Cross-informant comparison revealed critical empirical variations, such as varying degrees of social media dependency, FOMO, and coffee quality preference versus viral trends. Crucially, negative-case analysis prevented deterministic conclusions by capturing evidence of consumer resistance, skepticism, and personal agency alongside algorithmic influence. This analytical strategy ensured a nuanced portrayal of the dialectical relationship between algorithmic shaping and consumer autonomy, while transparent direct quotes allow readers to trace the logical alignment between empirical data and theoretical interpretation.

Research Ethics

This study strictly adhered to qualitative ethical standards, ensuring voluntary informed consent, complete confidentiality, and data usage limited solely to academic purposes. Participants were fully briefed on the research scope, interview procedures, recording practices, and their unconditional right to decline answering or withdraw at any stage. Given the focus on digital identities and social media habits, stringent measures were taken to protect participant privacy: direct social media handles, personal identifiers, and sensitive disclosures were anonymized, with informants represented solely by alphanumeric codes (e.g., I1, I2). Furthermore, direct quotations were carefully selected and contextualized to safeguard informant anonymity while upholding analytical transparency.

Methodological Alignment with Research Objectives

Overall, the methodological design aims to address the research questions at an interpretive rather than merely descriptive level. Rather than asserting that all Generation Z consumers experience hyperreality or that algorithms deterministically drive consumption, this

study explains how coffee consumption experiences are subjectively given meaning and how those meanings evolve as physical experiences are converted into digital content, validated socially, transformed into identity symbols, and recirculated across platforms. By treating Tomoro Coffee as a contextual empirical site, the research contributes an in-depth interpretive explanation of the intersections among symbolic consumption, digital identity, hyperreality, and algorithmic mediation, allowing localized empirical findings to meaningfully inform broader discourses on consumer culture transformation in the digital age.

4. Results and Discussion

Profile and Variations of Gen Z Consumption Orientation

Interviews with five informants indicate that coffee consumption among Generation Z in Bandar Lampung is not a homogeneous activity, but is shaped by diverse motivations, including comfort and productivity, routine and coffee-lover identity, taste quality, ambiance, aesthetics, and social recommendations. Their content orientation also varies from experience-oriented consumers who rarely document their visits to content-oriented consumers who actively capture and share their experiences. These findings suggest that coffee shops have evolved into multifunctional consumption spaces where coffee serves not only as a product but also as part of functional, social, recreational, and symbolic experiences. While coffee quality remains important, it is not the sole determinant of consumption, as experience-oriented consumers tend to prioritize comfort and quality, whereas content-oriented consumers place greater emphasis on aesthetics and visual appeal.

From Coffee Consumption to Digital Content Production

The findings reveal a significant shift in the consumer's role, from merely consuming experiences to actively producing representations of those experiences. Among content-oriented informants, photographing coffee shops is not simply personal documentation but involves selecting and curating experiences considered worthy of public display, including consideration of visual consistency with their Instagram feed. This process demonstrates that the boundaries between consumption and communication are increasingly blurred, as coffee consumption may extend from drinking to capturing, editing, uploading, and receiving audience responses. Consequently, content becomes a second form of consumption experience, in which coffee holds functional value while the resulting visual content carries symbolic and communicative value. Digital responses such as likes, comments, and views may also provide social validation, indicating that consumption experiences are evaluated not only through product quality and comfort but also through how they are represented and received by digital audiences.

Coffee Shop as a Symbol and Medium of Identity Construction

The findings indicate that coffee shop choices can contribute to identity construction, even when informants do not explicitly recognize this relationship. Their preferences, consumption styles, and social media representations reflect aspects of self-image, suggesting that coffee shops function as identity resources through which consumers express personal interests, lifestyles, and preferences. When consumption experiences are shared online, their symbolic value becomes stronger as they gain an audience and transform coffee consumption into symbolic self-presentation. However, informants generally rejected a direct association between coffee shop choices and social status, emphasizing personal comfort and preferences instead. This reflects a form of reflexive consumption, in which Gen Z recognizes the symbolic dimensions of consumption while maintaining that their choices are primarily driven by personal preferences.

Hyperreality: When Digital Representation Precedes Actual Experience

One of the strongest findings is the existence of a gap between the representation of coffee shops on social media and the actual consumer experience. All informants had experiences visiting coffee shops after previously seeing them through social media. However, they also acknowledged that digital representations are not always identical to real conditions. Rafi stated that not all experiences match what is displayed on social media, while other informants observed that a place sometimes looks more attractive in photos than in reality.

FOMO and Differentiation of Vulnerability to Trends

Social media plays a significant role in driving interest toward trending coffee shops, though the intensity of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) varies substantially among consumers—ranging from explicit susceptibility to complete indifference or a strict preference for product

quality over viral trends. Rather than acting as a deterministic driver, FOMO functions primarily as a social-digital trigger that heightens spatial awareness and visibility, while final visit decisions remain mediated by individual agency and personal preferences. This nuanced interplay reinforces the concept of algorithmic hyperreality, demonstrating that while algorithmic recommendations strategically shape visibility and suggestion, consumers retain the agency to accept, negotiate, or reject these digital signals.

Aesthetics, Virality, and the Shift in Consumer Values

Spatial aesthetics and interior design emerge as consistent determinants of consumer visits, serving as an essential prerequisite for content-oriented individuals while enhancing environmental comfort for experience-driven consumers. However, empirical findings reveal a distinct decoupling between viral popularity and product quality, as consumers actively negotiate symbolic value against functional value. While viral aesthetics and visual appeal initially drive spatial interest, consumers continuously utilize product quality, particularly coffee taste, as a critical evaluative mechanism, demonstrating that aesthetic exposure does not override baseline standards of physical utility.

“Coffee for the Sake of Content” as a Normalized Consumption Practice

When integrated, the findings illustrate the institutionalized normalization of 'coffee consumption for content' among Generation Z, where capturing and broadcasting experiences is perceived as a natural socio-cultural practice rather than an anomaly. This normalization reflects a fundamental paradigm shift: spatial consumption is no longer merely the end product, but raw material for digital content production, prompting consumers to implicitly evaluate what can be represented alongside what is consumed. Consequently, a self-reinforcing cyclic model emerges, where physical consumption yields digital content, content triggers social validation, validation amplifies symbolic value, and heightened symbolic value systematically drives the reproduction of further consumption.

Synthesis of Findings: Consumption Behavior Model of Gen Z Coffee in Bandar Lampung

Based on the interviews, this study proposes an interpretive model of Gen Z coffee consumption in Bandar Lampung. Rather than providing statistical generalization, the model represents an analytical generalization derived from recurring patterns and variations among the five informants. The findings suggest that coffee consumption is multidimensional, involving product function, experience, social interaction, aesthetics, and identity. These experiences may be transformed into digital content, acquire symbolic meaning, receive social validation, and become influenced by algorithmic visibility and social trends. The resulting process can be represented as:

Coffee Consumption → Experience → Content Production → Symbolic Representation → Social Validation → Identity Construction → Algorithmic Visibility → Hyperreality → Reproduction of Consumption

This model indicates that consumption does not end when coffee is consumed; rather, physical experiences can be converted into digital signs that gain social value and potentially encourage further consumption. However, the process is not entirely linear or deterministic, as consumer agency remains important in negotiating trends, social validation, and personal preferences. Therefore, Gen Z coffee consumption in a digital environment can be understood as algorithmically mediated symbolic consumption, in which physical experience, digital representation, identity, and algorithmic visibility continuously interact. In this context, the coffee shop functions not only as a place to consume coffee but also as a site of experience, representation, identity, and algorithmic circulation.

From Coffee Consumption to Content Consumption

The findings indicate that Gen Z coffee consumption extends beyond the functional act of drinking coffee toward the consumption of experiences and their digital representations. Experiences at coffee shops can be photographed, curated, uploaded, and evaluated through audience responses, making content creation part of the consumption experience itself. As Rafi stated, “*Nggak sekedar cuma minum. Tempatnya juga enak buat nongkrong, ketemu kawan. Bahkan buat nugas pun juga bisa.*” (“It’s not just about drinking coffee. The place is also nice for hanging out, meeting friends, and even doing assignments.”) This finding supports Wilska et al. (2023), who highlight the role of social media in young consumers’ identity expression, while extending their perspective by showing that coffee shops can serve as material resources for identity work. Through the choice of venue, visual objects, photographic style, and decisions about what to share, consumers construct and communicate aspects of their identity. Thus, coffee consumption can be understood as a circular process in which experiences are transformed

into content, content becomes symbolic representation, and audience responses provide social value, demonstrating that content creation is not merely an after-consumption activity but an integral part of the consumption experience.

Symbolic Consumption and the Performance of Digital Identity

The findings further show that coffee shops serve a broader symbolic function beyond providing coffee. Although informants initially tended to deny a connection between coffee shop choices and identity, deeper interviews revealed that their choices reflected comfort, lifestyle, openness to new experiences, and personal character. This contradiction suggests that the symbolic dimension of consumption may operate tacitly, as consumers may recognize their preferences without explicitly viewing them as forms of identity representation. As Nancy stated, *"Coffee shop juga menjadi tempat untuk bersosialisasi, mencari suasana baru, bahkan sebagai tempat mengekspresikan gaya hidup."* (*"Coffee shops are also places to socialize, seek new experiences, and even express one's lifestyle."*) Similarly, Oshi explained, *"Sebenarnya kalo respon dari orang lain jarang di pikirin. Lebih ke cocok gak fotonya untuk di posting di Instagram temanya."* (*"Actually, I rarely think about other people's responses. It's more about whether the photo fits the theme of my Instagram."*) These findings support the concept of symbolic consumption among Gen Z by demonstrating that symbolic value is embedded not only in purchased products but also in consumption spaces and experiences. In digital environments, consumers therefore become not only consumers of symbols but also producers, curators, and distributors of symbolic representations through social media.

Hyperreality Begins Before the Physical Consumption Experience

An important contribution of this study is the finding that digital representation can precede actual consumption. All informants had visited coffee shops after encountering them on social media, while acknowledging that online representations did not always correspond to physical reality. As Rafi stated, *"Jujur, enggak semua. Enggak semua sesuai ya sama yang di sosmed, dan realitanya enggak semuanya sama."* (*"Honestly, not all of them. Not everything matches what is shown on social media, and reality is not always the same."*) Nancy similarly noted, *"Tidak selalu. Kadang tempatnya memang bagus, tetapi ada juga yang terlihat lebih menarik di foto dibandingkan kondisi aslinya."* (*"Not always. Sometimes the place is indeed good, but there are also cases where it looks more attractive in photos than in reality."*) These findings suggest that social media functions not merely as an information source but as a space for forming pre-consumption expectations. Thus, hyperreality is not simply the replacement of reality by representation; rather, representation becomes a precursor to consumption by shaping expectations before the physical experience occurs. In this context, the consumption process increasingly begins with digital representation, followed by expectation, physical experience, and evaluation, indicating that the meaning of consumption may be constructed before consumers encounter the object directly. This extends Consumer Culture Theory by demonstrating that, for Gen Z, the consumption experience can begin on the screen before it takes place in the physical coffee shop.

From Hyperreality to Algorithmic Hyperreality

However, the findings suggest that contemporary hyperreality cannot be explained solely through the relationship between consumers and social media, as digital representations circulate within platforms where visibility is algorithmically mediated. This aligns with Airoidi & Rokka's (2022) concept of algorithmic consumer culture, which emphasizes algorithms as non-neutral mediators of consumption. Empirically, when coffee shop content gains popularity, increased visibility can attract consumers, whose subsequent experiences generate new content, creating a recursive consumption loop:

Consumption → Content → Algorithmic Visibility → Attraction → New Consumption
→ New Content

The algorithm does not directly instruct consumers to visit or purchase, but influences consumption through visibility, recommendation, repetition, and normalization. Repeated exposure can make a coffee shop appear more popular, desirable, or worth experiencing, thereby shaping the environment in which consumer preferences develop. Based on these findings, this study proposes the concept of algorithmic hyperreality, extending hyperreality by emphasizing that digital representations do not circulate neutrally; their visibility is selectively shaped by algorithmic systems. Thus, both the representations and the mechanisms determining which representations remain visible contribute to the construction of contemporary consumption realities.

FOMO, Viral Consumption, and Consumer Agency

The findings on FOMO add an important nuance to the concept of algorithmic hyperreality. Although all informants had been attracted to coffee shops encountered on social

media, the degree of influence varied, with some showing stronger FOMO while others resisted through personal preferences for comfort and coffee quality. As Ona stated, *“Kalau gue pribadi lebih suka yang biasa aja sih, soalnya yang viral itu belum tentu juga rasanya enak kan. Kadang cuman menang di tempatnya aja.”* (“Personally, I prefer ordinary places because something being viral does not necessarily mean the coffee tastes good. Sometimes, it is only the place that is appealing.”) This finding supports Airol di & Rokka’s (2022) view of algorithmic consumer culture as dialectical: while algorithms shape the consumption environment, consumers retain agency to negotiate digital signals with personal preferences. Gen Z therefore should not be understood merely as algorithmic subjects who passively follow trends, but as negotiating consumers who evaluate popularity against quality, comfort, and personal needs. Accordingly, this study does not claim that algorithms directly cause coffee consumption; rather, algorithmic visibility creates a cultural environment in which certain consumption possibilities become more salient, while actual consumption remains negotiated by consumer agency.

The Paradox of Critical but Participatory Gen Z

One of the most notable findings is the paradox between critical awareness and continued participation. Although informants recognized that coffee shops can function as status symbols, social media representations may differ from reality, and virality does not necessarily indicate quality, they continued to engage with digital consumption practices. As Oshi stated, *“Jujur iya karena kita-kita ini apa lagi Gen Z kadang agak FOMO. Bener-bener ngescroll TikTok ada coffee shop baru langsung rame nih.”* (“Honestly, yes, because we Gen Z can sometimes experience FOMO. When scrolling through TikTok, we often see a new coffee shop that suddenly becomes popular.”) This suggests that resistance to digital consumer culture does not necessarily involve rejecting the system entirely. Instead, consumers engage in selective participation, following certain trends while critically evaluating others based on personal preferences and needs. Consistent with Airol di and Rokka’s (2022) dialectical view of platform control and consumer resistance, this finding demonstrates that Gen Z can remain critical of algorithmic and symbolic influences while continuing to participate in them. Consequently, practices such as coffee for content can become normalized as part of everyday social consumption rather than being perceived solely as consumption for display.

Theoretical Contribution: Toward an Algorithmic Hyperreality of Consumption

Theoretically, this study offers three main contributions. First, it extends the concept of symbolic consumption by showing that, in the digital era, consumption symbols are attached not only to products but also to spaces, experiences, aesthetics, and consumer-generated content. Second, it extends the understanding of consumer identity by demonstrating that identity is expressed not only through consumption itself but also through its digital representation, supporting Wilska et al. (2023) on the role of social media in young consumers’ identity construction. Third, this study connects hyperreality with algorithmic consumer culture by proposing the concept of algorithmic hyperreality of consumption. Building on Airol di and Rokka (2022), the concept describes a condition in which consumer-generated representations gain algorithmic visibility and subsequently shape the consumption expectations of other consumers. Rather than replacing Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, this perspective contextualizes it within the contemporary digital ecosystem, where consumers actively produce simulations through photos, videos, reviews, and experience narratives, while platforms amplify selected representations through algorithmic mechanisms. Consequently, contemporary consumption realities are increasingly shaped by the interaction between consumer-generated signs, algorithmic visibility, and identity performance.

5. Conclusions

The findings suggest that coffee shops should manage not only product quality and service but also the broader experience ecosystem, as consumer experiences can be transformed into content that influences others. For Tomoro Coffee, digital promotions, consistent social media activity, content collaborations, and interior aesthetics emerged as important elements in attracting Gen Z consumers. These strategies can be strengthened by creating experiences that are visually shareable while remaining consistent with the actual experience, making authenticity strategically important in reducing the gap between digital representation and physical reality. Moreover, Gen Z consumers should be viewed as co-creators of brand meaning, as consumer-generated content can function as electronic word-of-mouth and contribute to brand identity. However, managerial strategies should not focus solely on virality, since some consumers continue to prioritize coffee quality and comfort. Effective positioning therefore requires the integration of functional value and symbolic appeal, ensuring that an Instagrammable experience is supported by an authentic and satisfying consumption experience.

Future research could extend this study through a mixed-method design combining qualitative exploration with quantitative testing of the algorithmic hyperreality model. The identified mechanisms, including content production, symbolic consumption, digital identity, algorithmic visibility, FOMO, and consumer agency, could be operationalized into measurable constructs to examine their relationships statistically. Comparative studies across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and review-based platforms could also reveal differences in algorithmic visibility and consumption practices. Longitudinal research and digital ethnography would further help trace how coffee shops move from discovery and viral visibility to normalization and declining relevance, while observing how content is produced, circulated, and engaged with over time.

Future studies should also examine consumer agency more explicitly by considering factors such as algorithmic literacy, digital skepticism, persuasion knowledge, and consumer resistance. These factors may explain why consumers exposed to similar digital content make different consumption decisions. Furthermore, the concept of algorithmic hyperreality could be developed by distinguishing between consumer-generated, brand-generated, and algorithmically amplified representations. This would shift the research question from whether social media creates hyperreality toward examining who produces consumption realities, who determines their visibility, how consumers negotiate them, and how these mediated realities shape subsequent consumption practices.

References

- Airoidi, M., & Rokka, J. (2022). Algorithmic consumer culture. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 25(5), 411-428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2022.2084726>
- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868-882. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426626>
- Barta, K., & Andalibi, N. (2021). Constructing authenticity on TikTok: Social norms and social support on the “fun” platform. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), Article 430. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479574>
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). University of Michigan Press.
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(2), 139-168. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209154>
- Bhandari, A., & Bimo, S. (2022). Why's everyone on TikTok now? The algorithmized self and the future of self-making on social media. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086241>
- Bimo, S., & Bhandari, A. (2023). Algorithms, aesthetics and the changing nature of cultural consumption online. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2023i0.13397>
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, 56(3), 1391-1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>
- Herawati, I., Rizal, I., & Amita, N. (2022). The impact of social media on fear of missing out among Z generation: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Islamic and Contemporary Psychology*, 2(2), 92-98. <https://doi.org/10.25299/jicop.v2i2.11179>
- Jabeen, F., Tandon, A., Sithipolvanichgul, J., Srivastava, S., & Dhir, A. (2023). Social media-induced fear of missing out (FoMO) and social media fatigue: The role of narcissism, comparison and disclosure. *Journal of Business Research*, 159, 113693. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113693>
- Kamboj, S., & Sharma, M. (2023). Social media adoption behaviour: Consumer innovativeness and participation intention. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12848>
- Koles, B., Audrezet, A., Moulard, J. G., Ameen, N., & McKenna, B. (2024). The authentic virtual influencer: Authenticity manifestations in the metaverse. *Journal of Business Research*, 170, 114325. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114325>
- Lee, A. Y., Mieczkowski, H., Ellison, N. B., & Hancock, J. T. (2022). The algorithmic crystal: Conceptualizing the self through algorithmic personalization on TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 6(CSCW2), Article 265, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3555601>
- Lu, Y., Ding, X., & Lin, Y. (2026). How TikTok influences Gen Z's consumer decisions: A systematic review. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 50(3), e70206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.70206>
- Michaelidou, N., Christodoulides, G., & Presi, C. (2022). Ultra-high-net-worth individuals: Self-presentation and luxury consumption on Instagram. *European Journal of Marketing*, 56(4), 949-967. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJm-11-2020-0853>

- Ooi, K.-B., Lee, V.-H., Hew, J.-J., Leong, L.-Y., Tan, G. W.-H., & Lim, A.-F. (2023). Social media influencers: An effective marketing approach? *Journal of Business Research*, 160, 113773. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113773>
- Osorio, M. L., Centeno, E., & Cambra-Fierro, J. (2023). An empirical examination of human brand authenticity as a driver of brand love. *Journal of Business Research*, 165, 114059. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114059>
- Shi, J., Lai, K. K., & Chen, G. (2023). Examining retweeting behavior on social networking sites from the perspective of self-presentation. *PLOS ONE*, 18(5), e0286135. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0286135>
- Tewatia, M., & Majumdar, S. (2022). Humans of Instagram: Exploring influencer identity discourses on Instagram. *Journal of Digital Social Research*, 4(4). <https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v4i4.120>
- Voorveld, H. A. M., Meppelink, C. S., & Boerman, S. C. (2024). Consumers' persuasion knowledge of algorithms in social media advertising: Identifying consumer groups based on awareness, appropriateness, and coping ability. *International Journal of Advertising*, 43(6), 960-986. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2023.2264045>
- Wilska, T.-A., Holkkola, M., & Tuominen, J. (2023). The role of social media in the creation of young people's consumer identities. *SAGE Open*, 13(2), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231177030>