

Ergo-Iconic Meaning-Making in Local Products: Generation Z, Digital Consumption Experience, and Consumer-Interpreted Value

Andriyansah¹

¹Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Terbuka, South Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia
Jl. Cabe Raya, Pondok Cabe, Pamulang, Tangerang Selatan, 15418
*Corresponding Email: andri@ecampus.ut.ac.id¹

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Publication information

Research article

HOW TO CITE

Andriyansah. (2025). Ergo-iconic meaning-making in local products: Generation Z, consumers, digital observations of social digital consumption experience, and consumer-interpreted value. *International Journal of Accounting and Finance in Asia Pasific*, 8(3), 574–590.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32535/ijafap.v8i3.4811>

Copyright @ 2026 owned by Author(s).
Published by IJAFAP



This is an open-access article.

License:

Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike
(CC BY-NC-SA)

Received: 15 August 2025

Accepted: 17 September 2025

Published: 20 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Generation Z interprets ergo-iconic value in local products through digital consumption experiences. Using a qualitative interpretive design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 30 Generation Z consumers, digital observations of social media and marketplace content, and analysis of product descriptions, packaging narratives, and promotional materials. The findings reveal five interrelated themes: functional interpretation of ergo value, symbolic interpretation of iconic value, digital articulation of product meaning, negotiation of local identity, and formation of an ergo-iconic meaning-making model. Ergo value reflects usability, comfort, reliability, affordability, accessibility, and everyday suitability, whereas iconic value encompasses local identity, authenticity, visual distinctiveness, cultural narratives, community connection, and lifestyle relevance. Digital consumption enables these meanings to be evaluated, shared, and renegotiated. The study conceptualizes ergo-iconic value as a consumer-interpreted, socially circulated construct and suggests that MSMEs should develop products that are functionally credible, symbolically coherent, and digitally communicable.

Keywords: Ergo-Iconic Value; Generation Z; Local Products; Digital Consumption Experience; Consumer Meaning-Making; Symbolic Consumption.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of digital consumption has transformed how local products are encountered, evaluated, purchased, and interpreted by younger consumers. Local products are no longer recognized only through physical markets, regional proximity, or direct community networks. They are increasingly encountered through social media content, marketplace reviews, short-form videos, digital storytelling, influencers, user-generated content, and electronic word of mouth. In Indonesia, this transformation is supported by a large digital ecosystem. DataReportal (2025) reported that Indonesia had 212 million internet users at the start of 2025 and 143 million social media user identities in January 2025. Although social media user identities should not be treated as equivalent to unique individual users, these figures indicate that digital platforms provide an important environment in which local products can gain visibility, be evaluated, and circulate socially. This environment creates new opportunities for local products to reach younger consumers, while also intensifying competition over attention, meaning, credibility, and trust.

Generation Z is an analytically important consumer cohort in this context because its consumption practices are closely connected to digital platforms, visual communication, peer influence, and self-presentation. Studies on Generation Z consumers show that technology-mediated retail environments shape expectations related to convenience, autonomy, speed, interaction, and experience (Priporas et al., 2017). Social media also influences product discovery and purchase-related responses among young consumers, particularly through visual platforms and peer-mediated influence (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Electronic word of mouth further enables consumers to articulate product experiences beyond producer-controlled communication, making reviews, comments, recommendations, and consumer narratives important elements in the circulation of product meaning (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). These developments suggest that local products should not be understood only as material goods, but also as digitally mediated objects of interpretation.

The concept of ergo-iconic value provides a relevant lens for examining this issue. The concept can be traced to Andriyansyah's doctoral work on the positional advantage of ergo-iconic product value, which linked distinctive product attributes, functional comfort, artistic comfort, pleasure value, and marketing performance (Andriyansyah, 2018). Later studies extended the concept to hotel service value, SME competitiveness, social media virality, product value in the digital era, green MSME representation, and agricultural product innovation (Andriyansah et al., 2020; Andriyansah et al., 2023; Andriyansah, 2025; Andriyansah & Saputra, 2025; Andriyansah et al., 2026; Sukendri et al., 2025). In this trajectory, ergo-iconic value refers to the interaction between functional usefulness and symbolic recognizability. Ergo value concerns usability, comfort, quality, accessibility, and practical relevance, while iconic value concerns visual distinctiveness, symbolic meaning, local identity, authenticity, and social representation.

However, most discussions of ergo-iconic value still emphasize the construct from the perspective of product strategy, marketing performance, competitiveness, or conceptual modelling. Less attention has been given to how consumers, particularly Generation Z, interpret ergo-iconic value in everyday digital consumption experience. This gap is important because product value is not only designed by producers or embedded in product attributes. It is also interpreted, negotiated, and circulated by consumers through digital encounters, marketplace reviews, comments, recommendations, posts, and social media practices. In other words, local product value is not merely offered to consumers; it is actively made meaningful through consumer interpretation and digital articulation.

This article addresses that gap by examining the following research question: how does Generation Z interpret ergo-iconic value in local products through digital consumption experience? The article argues that Generation Z interprets local products through three interconnected meaning-making processes: functional interpretation, symbolic interpretation, and digital articulation. Functional interpretation concerns how young consumers assess usability, comfort, quality, affordability, and accessibility. Symbolic interpretation concerns how they understand local identity, authenticity, visual distinctiveness, cultural narrative, and social meaning. Digital articulation concerns how product meanings are displayed, reviewed, shared, recommended, and reinterpreted through social-digital practices. Through these processes, local products may become not only objects of utility, but also resources for identity expression, local attachment, lifestyle distinction, and social communication

LITERATURE REVIEW

Product Value and Consumer Meaning

Product value has long been central in marketing and consumer behavior research because it explains how consumers evaluate products in relation to perceived benefits, sacrifices, and consumption experiences. Zeithaml (1988) conceptualized perceived value as consumers' overall assessment of product utility based on perceptions of what is received and what is given. Sheth et al. (1991) expanded this view by identifying multiple consumption values, including functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional values. Sweeney and Soutar (2001) further developed the PERVAL scale, which measures perceived value through quality, price, emotional value, and social value.

These perspectives show that product value is not limited to utility or price. Consumers evaluate products not only because they work, but also because they generate emotions, express social meaning, create distinction, and fit particular consumption contexts. This point is important for studying local products because their value often combines practical performance with symbolic associations such as origin, authenticity, craftsmanship, community, and cultural identity. A local product may be valued as a useful object, but it may also be valued as a sign of attachment, taste, locality, or social belonging.

In digital consumption, product value becomes more interactive and socially mediated. Consumers do not rely only on producer claims, packaging, or direct product use. They encounter product meanings through marketplace reviews, ratings, visual content, peer recommendations, social media narratives, and user-generated evaluations. Electronic word of mouth enables consumers to articulate opinions and experiences beyond producer-controlled communication (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Product value is therefore not only embedded in product attributes; it is interpreted, compared, reviewed, and circulated through digital interaction.

For this study, product value is understood as a meaning-making process rather than a fixed product attribute. This position is necessary because Generation Z consumers may evaluate local products through both practical and symbolic criteria. A product may be valued because it is useful, affordable, accessible, and reliable, but also because it represents identity, taste, authenticity, lifestyle, or local attachment. Product value therefore becomes a bridge between material experience and consumer interpretation.

Ergo-Iconic Value

Ergo-iconic value integrates two interrelated dimensions. Ergo value refers to usability, comfort, quality, accessibility, affordability, efficiency, and practical relevance. It

concerns whether a product works well, fits consumers' everyday needs, and provides functional satisfaction. Iconic value refers to visual distinctiveness, symbolic meaning, local identity, authenticity, cultural narratives, aesthetic appeal, and social representation. It concerns whether a product is recognizable, meaningful, communicable, and capable of carrying identity.

The concept of ergo-iconic value can be traced to Andriyansyah's doctoral dissertation, which developed the positional advantage of ergo-iconic product value in relation to distinctive product attributes, functional comfort, artistic comfort, pleasure value, and marketing performance (Andriyansyah, 2018). Later studies applied and extended the concept in relation to hotel service value, SME competitiveness, green MSME representation in the platform economy, social media content virality, product value in the digital era, and agricultural product innovation (Andriyansah et al., 2020; Andriyansah et al., 2023; Andriyansah, 2025; Andriyansah & Saputra, 2025; Andriyansah et al., 2026; Sukendri et al., 2025).

These studies show that ergo-iconic value should not be reduced to product quality, visual attractiveness, or symbolic appeal alone. It refers to the relationship between function and meaning. A product has stronger ergo-iconic value when its usefulness, comfort, design, symbolism, and distinctiveness support one another. This is particularly relevant for local products because they must compete not only through price or quality, but also through recognizability, authenticity, narrative coherence, and digital communicability.

For the present study, ergo-iconic value is treated as an interpretive construct. This means that the study does not only ask whether producers design products with functional and symbolic attributes. It asks how Generation Z consumers interpret those attributes in digital consumption experience. A local product may be intended by producers as authentic, cultural, distinctive, or representative of locality, but its value depends on whether consumers recognize, accept, reinterpret, and articulate those meanings. Therefore, ergo-iconic value is not only produced by firms; it is also constructed through consumer interpretation.

Local Products and Consumption Identity

Local products are not only economic goods. They may also function as symbolic resources through which consumers express attachment, belonging, lifestyle, taste, distinction, and cultural recognition. Belk (1988) argues that possessions can become part of the extended self, while Arnould and Thompson (2005) show that consumption is embedded in identity projects, cultural meanings, and marketplace relationships. Holt (2004) further explains that products and brands become culturally meaningful when they embody narratives that consumers can use to negotiate identity.

In the context of local products, identity may be attached to origin, craftsmanship, community, regional symbols, cultural memory, sustainability, or authenticity. However, identity is not automatically produced by locality. A product does not become meaningful simply because it is labelled local. Local symbols may become superficial if they are detached from product quality, credible storytelling, coherent design, and meaningful consumer experience. Conversely, a local product can become identity-bearing when consumers are able to connect its practical use with symbolic recognition and social communication.

This perspective is important because Generation Z's relationship with local products cannot be understood as passive cultural inheritance. Young consumers may support local products, but their support is mediated by evaluation, comparison, digital exposure,

and self-presentation. They may ask whether a product is useful, visually coherent, socially recognizable, credible, and suitable for display or recommendation. In this sense, local product identity is negotiated through the relationship between product attributes and consumer meaning-making.

Local products therefore become media of consumption identity when they allow consumers to connect use value and identity value. Use value makes a product acceptable in everyday consumption, while identity value makes it meaningful in social and cultural terms. In digital environments, both values must be articulated through visual, narrative, and interactive forms that consumers can recognize, discuss, and share.

Generation Z and Digital Consumption Experience

Generation Z consumers operate in a consumption environment shaped by social media, marketplaces, visual content, short-form videos, digital payments, peer reviews, influencers, and recommendation systems. Studies on Generation Z consumers show that technology-mediated retail environments shape expectations related to convenience, autonomy, speed, interaction, and experience (Priporas et al., 2017). Social media also plays a significant role in product discovery and purchase-related responses among young consumers, especially through visual platforms and peer-mediated influence (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Digital consumption involves more than the act of purchase. It includes product discovery, comparison, evaluation, acquisition, use, sharing, reviewing, and reinterpretation. Consumers may first encounter a product through digital content before they experience the product materially. They may then evaluate the product through reviews, ratings, comments, peer recommendations, influencer narratives, and user-generated content. This makes consumption a sequence of mediated experiences rather than a single transaction.

For Generation Z, product meaning is often formed through the interaction between personal experience and social-digital validation. A product may be considered valuable not only because it performs well, but also because it is visually presentable, socially endorsed, narratively meaningful, and compatible with digital self-expression. This does not mean that Generation Z automatically values all local products. Rather, local products become meaningful when their functional qualities, symbolic meanings, and digital representations are mutually connected.

This literature provides the basis for examining how Generation Z interprets ergo-iconic value in local products. Digital consumption experience is the site where functional usefulness, symbolic recognition, and digital articulation meet. Through reviews, posts, recommendations, comments, and visual storytelling, consumers do not merely receive product meanings from producers. They reinterpret, negotiate, and circulate those meanings. Therefore, Generation Z's digital consumption experience is a crucial context for understanding how local products become useful, meaningful, and socially communicable

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design to examine how Generation Z gives meaning to ergo-iconic value in local products through digital consumption experience. This design is appropriate because the study focuses on interpretation, meaning-making, consumer experience, and socially situated digital practices rather than on measuring the statistical effect of ergo-iconic value on purchase intention. Qualitative inquiry is

suitable for exploring how participants construct meaning from lived experience, while interpretive research allows consumer accounts to be understood within the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The unit of analysis is Generation Z's interpretation of local product value in digital consumption practices. The study involved 30 Generation Z informants who had encountered, purchased, reviewed, recommended, or shared local products through digital platforms. Informants were selected purposively according to four criteria. First, they were between 18 and 29 years old. Second, they had direct experience with local products through social media, marketplaces, or online communities. Third, they actively used digital platforms for product discovery, evaluation, purchase, or sharing. Fourth, they were able to describe their experiences with local products in relation to function, identity, and digital communication. The number of informants was considered adequate because the study sought depth, variation, and conceptual relevance rather than statistical representation. In qualitative interview research, sample adequacy depends on the study aim, sample specificity, quality of dialogue, and analytical strategy (Malterud et al., 2016).

Table 1. Profile of informants

Code	Gender	Age	Main digital consumption context	Local product experience
P01	Female	19	Social media and marketplace browsing	Purchased local food and fashion products
P02	Female	21	Social media product discovery	Followed local brand narratives and origin stories
P03	Female	22	Marketplace purchasing	Compared product quality, price, packaging, and reviews
P04	Female	24	Online shopping	Compared local products with national brands
P05	Male	20	Social media and marketplace use	Discovered local products through short-form content
P06	Male	21	Peer recommendation and online communities	Shared local product recommendations with friends
P07	Male	24	Social media and marketplace use	Evaluated accessibility, usability, and price fairness
P08	Female	20	Visual content and brand pages	Followed local product visual branding
P09	Female	25	Marketplace reviews	Relied on user reviews and buyer-generated content
P10	Male	23	Social media use	Evaluated local identity and contemporary design
P11	Female	23	Short-form video platforms	Related local products to self-presentation
P12	Male	22	Marketplace and review comparison	Compared viral content with actual buyer reviews
P13	Female	18	Social media browsing	Purchased local snacks after seeing peer posts
P14	Male	26	Marketplace purchasing	Compared delivery, packaging, and product durability
P15	Female	21	Brand pages and social media ads	Followed local beauty and care products
P16	Female	27	Marketplace and product reviews	Evaluated price fairness and repeat-purchase value

Code	Gender	Age	Main digital consumption context	Local product experience
P17	Male	25	Online communities	Discussed local products with peer groups
P18	Female	22	Short-form video content	Discovered local craft and fashion products
P19	Male	28	Marketplace and digital payment use	Purchased local products through online marketplaces
P20	Female	20	Social media storytelling	Responded to local product narratives and visuals
P21	Male	24	Review comparison	Compared local and non-local product performance
P22	Female	26	Social commerce	Purchased local products through social media sellers
P23	Female	19	Peer recommendation	Tried local products recommended by friends
P24	Male	27	Marketplace search	Evaluated product availability and reliability
P25	Female	25	Visual branding and packaging	Considered local products for lifestyle expression
P26	Male	29	Online shopping and review reading	Compared local products with established brands
P27	Female	22	Social media interaction	Commented on and shared local product content
P28	Male	21	Short-form video and marketplace use	Checked reviews after seeing viral local products
P29	Female	24	Online communities and peer review	Discussed local product authenticity
P30	Male	23	Social media and marketplace comparison	Evaluated usefulness, price, and local identity

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, digital observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were used to explore informants' experiences of discovering, evaluating, purchasing, using, reviewing, and sharing local products. Digital observation was conducted on publicly accessible social media posts, marketplace reviews, brand pages, short-form video content, and user-generated content related to local products. This technique draws on the logic of netnographic inquiry, which adapts qualitative interpretive research to online consumer practices and digital traces (Kozinets, 2015). Document analysis was used to examine product descriptions, marketplace presentations, packaging narratives, promotional materials, and digital campaign content.

Table 2. Data sources and analytical focus

Data source	Data form	Analytical focus
In-depth interviews	30 Generation Z informants	Consumer interpretation of ergo value, iconic value, and digital articulation
Digital observation	Public posts, reviews, comments, short-form videos, and user-generated content	Circulation of product meaning, review practices, visual storytelling, and consumer evaluation
Document analysis	Product descriptions, marketplace pages, packaging	Producer-side articulation of function, local identity, authenticity, and digital communicability

	narratives, and promotional materials	
--	---------------------------------------	--

The interview guide focused on five themes. The first theme concerned how informants defined and identified local products. The second concerned how they assessed product usefulness, comfort, quality, price, and accessibility. The third concerned how they interpreted local identity, authenticity, visual distinctiveness, and cultural meaning. The fourth concerned how digital content, reviews, influencers, and peer recommendations shaped their perceptions. The fifth concerned how informants decided whether a product was worth displaying, reviewing, recommending, or sharing. Interviews were conducted with informed consent, recorded with permission, and transcribed for analysis. Informant names and identifiable digital traces were anonymized.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach was used to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning across interview transcripts, digital observation notes, and document materials. The analysis proceeded through six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and narrative interpretation. Initial coding was guided by sensitizing concepts derived from the literature, including ergo value, iconic value, digital articulation, consumption identity, and meaning-making. However, the analysis remained open to emergent themes that arose from informants' accounts and digital materials.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation, reflexivity, auditability, and interpretive validation. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data, digital observation, and document analysis. Reflexive memos were used to record coding decisions, emerging interpretations, and the researcher's assumptions during analysis. Auditability was maintained by documenting the steps of data collection, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Selected interpretations were discussed with academic peers to strengthen credibility. Following qualitative trustworthiness principles, the study emphasizes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability rather than statistical generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The study followed ethical principles for research involving human participants and digital materials. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before interviews, and informants were allowed to withdraw from the study. Digital observation was limited to publicly available materials, and private messages, closed groups, or restricted accounts were not used without explicit permission. Usernames, profile images, and other identifiable traces were removed from the analysis. These procedures allowed the study to examine digital consumption practices while protecting participant privacy and minimizing ethical risk.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes explaining how Generation Z interprets ergo-iconic value in local products through digital consumption experiences: (1) functional interpretation of ergo value, (2) symbolic interpretation of iconic value, (3) digital articulation of product meaning, (4) negotiation of local identity, and (5) the formation of an ergo-iconic meaning-making model. The findings indicate that local product value is interpreted through practical experience, symbolic recognition, and digital circulation.

Functional Interpretation of Ergo Value

The first theme concerns the functional interpretation of local products. Generation Z consumers initially evaluate whether local products are useful, comfortable, reliable, affordable, accessible, and suitable for everyday use. Local origin or cultural identity alone does not appear sufficient to sustain consumer interest when functional expectations are not fulfilled.

One participant explained:

"I am interested when a product is local, but I still look at its quality, price, packaging, and reviews. If the quality is inconsistent, I will not buy it again just because it is local." (P03, female, 22 years old, marketplace user)

Another participant similarly emphasized:

"I support local products, but the product still has to be comfortable to use, easy to find, and reasonably priced. If it is difficult to buy or the quality is lacking, I will look for another brand." (P07, male, 24 years old, social media and marketplace user)

Digital observation revealed a similar pattern. Marketplace reviews and social media comments frequently evaluated local products according to delivery speed, packaging quality, product consistency, price, accessibility, and suitability for everyday use. One marketplace review stated:

"The product is good and the local concept is interesting, but the packaging needs improvement because it arrived in a less presentable condition." (DO-01, marketplace review)

These findings indicate that functional interpretation extends beyond technical usability. Generation Z consumers also consider whether products fit their daily routines, provide reasonable value, reduce inconvenience, and can be accessed through familiar digital channels. Functional performance therefore emerged as an important basis for subsequent evaluations of local products.

Symbolic Interpretation of Iconic Value

The second theme concerns the symbolic interpretation of iconic value. Beyond practical considerations, participants interpreted local products through local identity, authenticity, visual distinctiveness, cultural narratives, community connection, and lifestyle relevance.

One participant explained:

"I like local products when the story feels authentic. It is not just about using regional motifs or local words, but about showing where the product comes from, who makes it, and why the product matters." (P02, female, 21 years old, social media user)

Another participant associated symbolic value with self-expression:

"Sometimes I buy local products because they feel close to my identity. But the design still has to fit today's style. If the traditional element feels too forced, I do not feel confident wearing or posting it." (P11, female, 23 years old, short-video platform user)

Digital observation further showed that consumers questioned symbolic claims when local identity appeared disconnected from a clear or credible product narrative:

"The product carries a local name, but the product story is unclear. It gives the impression that local identity is being used merely for branding." (DO-02, social media comment)

The findings show that iconic value is not interpreted merely through cultural motifs or visual appearance. Participants assessed whether the local identity represented by a product was credible, relevant, distinctive, and compatible with contemporary lifestyles.

Symbolic meaning also influenced whether consumers considered a product appropriate for displaying, discussing, reviewing, or recommending through digital platforms.

Digital Articulation of Product Meaning

The third theme concerns digital articulation. Digital consumption experiences influenced how Generation Z encountered, evaluated, and circulated meanings associated with local products. Participants commonly discovered products through social media posts, marketplaces, short-form videos, influencer content, online communities, peer recommendations, and user-generated reviews.

One participant stated:

"I usually find out about local products from social media first. If the video is clear, the review is convincing, and the product looks useful, then I check it on the marketplace." (P05, male, 20 years old, social media and marketplace user)

Another participant highlighted the importance of consumer-generated reviews:

"I trust reviews more when they come from ordinary buyers, not only from influencers. Buyer reviews feel more honest because they show the actual condition of the product." (P09, female, 25 years old, marketplace user)

Digital observation showed that functional and symbolic product meanings were communicated simultaneously. Functional meanings appeared through reviews, ratings, demonstrations, usage experiences, delivery information, and testimonials, whereas symbolic meanings were articulated through visual storytelling, packaging, cultural symbols, origin narratives, and lifestyle content.

"The content does not only show the final product, but also the production process, the local materials used, and how the product is used in everyday life." (DO-03, short-form video content)

However, participants also identified discrepancies between digital visibility and actual product performance. As one participant explained:

"Sometimes a local product goes viral, but after I read buyer reviews, I decide not to buy it because the quality is not the same as what is shown in the content." (P12, male, 22 years old, marketplace user)

These findings demonstrate that digital platforms function not only as product discovery channels but also as spaces in which product meanings are evaluated, communicated, challenged, and reformulated.

Negotiating Local Identity in Digital Consumption

The fourth theme concerns the negotiation of local identity. Participants did not passively accept meanings communicated by producers. Instead, they evaluated what counted as local, authentic, useful, stylish, meaningful, and worth supporting by comparing local products with other alternatives and assessing their compatibility with contemporary lifestyles.

One participant stated:

"I want to support local products, but I still compare them with other brands. If the quality, design, and price do not make sense, I will choose another product." (P04, female, 24 years old, online shopper)

Another participant emphasized the importance of contemporary relevance:

“Local identity is important, but it has to be presented in a way that fits today’s style. If it only repeats tradition without innovation, it feels distant from my everyday life.” (P10, male, 23 years old, social media user)

Digital observations supported these accounts:

“Many comments show pride in local products, but in the same conversation users also ask for better packaging, clearer product information, and more consistent quality.” (DO-04, public comment thread)

The findings reveal a tension between emotional attachment to local products and critical product evaluation. Participants expressed interest in supporting local products while simultaneously expecting competitive quality, design, accessibility, pricing, packaging, and digital communication. Local identity was therefore continuously interpreted and negotiated according to consumers’ everyday experiences and expectations.

Ergo-Iconic Meaning-Making Model

Based on the thematic analysis, the findings indicate a four-stage process through which Generation Z develops ergo-iconic meanings around local products: digital encounter, functional assessment, symbolic interpretation, and digital articulation.

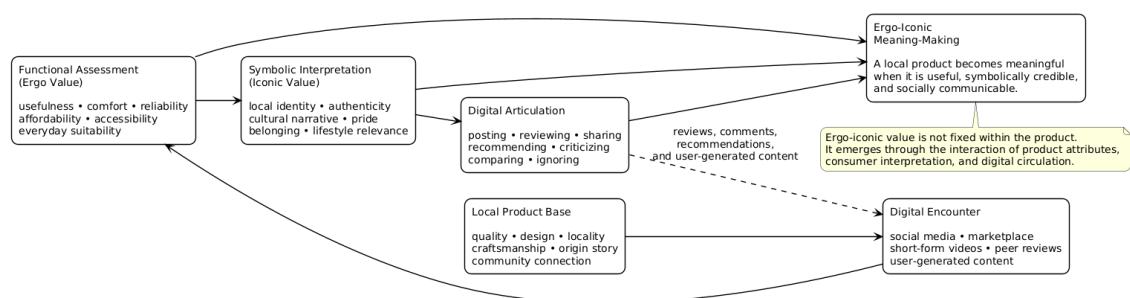
The first stage, digital encounter, occurs when consumers discover local products through social media, marketplace platforms, online communities, short-form videos, recommendations, or user-generated reviews. These encounters provide initial information and shape expectations toward the product.

The second stage, functional assessment, involves evaluating usability, comfort, reliability, affordability, accessibility, and suitability for everyday consumption. This assessment represents the functional or ergo dimension of product value.

The third stage, symbolic interpretation, involves assessing local identity, authenticity, visual distinctiveness, cultural narratives, community connections, and lifestyle relevance. At this stage, consumers determine whether the product carries meanings that they consider credible and relevant.

The fourth stage, digital articulation, occurs when consumers review, recommend, share, display, reinterpret, criticize, or ignore the product through digital platforms. Product meanings consequently become visible and available for interpretation by other consumers.

Figure 1. Qualitative Model of Ergo-Iconic Meaning-Making



Digital articulation also generates a feedback loop because reviews, comments, recommendations, and user-generated content subsequently become sources of information for other consumers' digital encounters. The findings therefore show that ergo-iconic value emerges through interactions among product attributes, consumer interpretations, and digital circulation rather than through product attributes alone.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Generation Z's interpretation of ergo-iconic value involves an interconnected process of functional evaluation, symbolic interpretation, identity negotiation, and digital articulation. Rather than perceiving local product value as an inherent characteristic established entirely by producers, Generation Z actively interprets and reconstructs value through consumption experiences and digital interactions.

The functional interpretation identified in this study supports product value theory. Zeithaml (1988) conceptualizes perceived value through consumers' evaluation of what is received relative to what is given, while Sheth et al. (1991) identify functional value as an important dimension of consumption value. Similarly, Sweeney and Soutar (2001) emphasize quality and price as important components of perceived value. The present findings extend these perspectives by demonstrating that functional value in digital consumption environments is not evaluated solely through direct product use. Generation Z also anticipates functional performance through reviews, ratings, comments, comparison content, photographs, and testimonials.

This finding refines the concept of ergo value. Ergo value encompasses not only technical usability and physical comfort but also consumers' perceptions of reliability, affordability, accessibility, everyday suitability, and digital convenience. Local identity may stimulate curiosity or initial support, but functional credibility determines whether consumers continue to regard the product as valuable. This is particularly relevant for Generation Z, whose digital consumption practices enable continuous comparison between local, national, and global alternatives.

The symbolic interpretation of iconic value is consistent with symbolic consumption and consumer culture theory. Belk (1988) argues that possessions may constitute part of the extended self, while Arnould and Thompson (2005) emphasize the relationship between consumption, cultural meanings, social relationships, and identity projects. Holt (2004) similarly demonstrates that products and brands acquire cultural significance through narratives that consumers incorporate into identity construction.

The findings extend these perspectives by demonstrating that iconic value cannot be assumed to reside automatically within cultural symbols or local origins. Local products become symbolically meaningful when consumers perceive their narratives, visual identities, cultural references, craftsmanship, and community connections as credible and relevant. The use of local motifs or terminology without a coherent product narrative may therefore be interpreted as superficial rather than authentic. Iconic value is consequently better understood as a consumer interpretation of symbolic credibility rather than simply a producer-created characteristic.

Symbolic value is particularly significant in digital self-presentation. Generation Z consumers evaluate not only what a product represents but also whether its meanings can be communicated through their digital identities. Packaging, visual design, product naming, cultural narratives, and origin stories can influence whether consumers regard products as appropriate for posting, recommending, or integrating into their lifestyle. Iconic value therefore has both cultural and communicative dimensions.

The role of digital articulation identified in this study is consistent with research on technology-mediated Generation Z consumption. Priporas et al. (2017) demonstrate that technology-mediated retail environments influence Generation Z expectations concerning convenience, autonomy, interaction, speed, and experience. Djafarova and Bowes (2021) further demonstrate the influence of visual social media on Generation Z's purchase-related responses. Similarly, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) show how electronic word of mouth enables consumers to communicate product-related opinions beyond producer-controlled channels.

However, the present study extends these perspectives by conceptualizing digital articulation as a mechanism of meaning production rather than merely a communication or evaluation channel. Reviews, ratings, photographs, comments, videos, recommendations, and user-generated content contribute to defining whether products are perceived as useful, credible, authentic, distinctive, or worth supporting. Functional and symbolic meanings therefore intersect in digital spaces.

This interpretation also explains why digital visibility or virality alone may be insufficient to establish sustainable consumer value. Digital exposure can attract attention, but negative reviews or inconsistencies between promotional claims and actual product experiences can weaken perceived value. Digital communication should therefore not be understood merely as promotion; it constitutes a space in which producer narratives are continuously evaluated and renegotiated by consumers.

The negotiation of local identity further extends consumption identity literature. Consistent with Belk (1988), Arnould and Thompson (2005), and Holt (2004), the findings demonstrate that consumption serves as a resource for identity expression and cultural meaning. However, Generation Z does not simply inherit or accept local identity in a fixed form. Consumers selectively reinterpret local meanings according to contemporary expectations concerning quality, design, affordability, convenience, authenticity, and lifestyle relevance.

Support for local products is consequently conditional rather than automatic. Cultural pride, regional belonging, ethical preferences, MSME support, or community attachment may encourage positive attitudes toward local products, but these symbolic considerations remain connected to functional expectations. This interaction explains why local product value cannot be reduced either to practical utility or cultural symbolism. Ergo and iconic value operate together.

The qualitative model developed from these findings integrates these dimensions into a circulating process. Generation Z first encounters products digitally, evaluates their functional credibility, interprets their symbolic meanings, and subsequently articulates those evaluations through digital practices. Importantly, digital articulation feeds back into subsequent digital encounters because consumer-generated reviews, recommendations, comments, and content become interpretive resources for other consumers.

The model therefore conceptualizes ergo-iconic value as consumer-interpreted and socially circulated rather than fixed within product attributes. A local product becomes ergo-iconic when it is experienced as functionally credible, interpreted as symbolically meaningful, and articulated as socially communicable. Product attributes remain important, but their value depends on how consumers interpret and circulate them.

The study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends product value theory by demonstrating that value is not merely an individual evaluation of benefits and sacrifices but also an interpretive and socially circulated process. Second, it extends symbolic consumption theory by showing that identity-bearing products are not only consumed as symbols but are continuously articulated and renegotiated through digital practices. Third, it refines the concept of ergo-iconic value by positioning it as a consumer-interpreted meaning-making construct rather than solely a product or marketing construct.

Previous studies have examined ergo-iconic value in relation to marketing performance, service value, SME competitiveness, social media virality, green MSME representation, product value in the digital era, and agricultural product innovation (Andriyansah et al., 2020; Andriyansah et al., 2023; Andriyansah, 2025; Andriyansah & Saputra, 2025; Andriyansah et al., 2026; Sukendri et al., 2025). The present study advances this literature by demonstrating that ergo-iconic value is also constructed through consumer meaning-making involving functional assessment, symbolic interpretation, identity negotiation, and digital articulation.

From a practical perspective, these findings indicate that local entrepreneurs and MSMEs should avoid relying exclusively on either functional quality or cultural symbolism. Products need to be functionally credible through consistent quality, usability, affordability, accessibility, and appropriate packaging while simultaneously communicating authentic and coherent symbolic meanings. Digital communication should also provide credible evidence of product performance, origin, production processes, cultural narratives, and everyday relevance. In this way, local products can become not only useful and culturally recognizable but also meaningful and communicable within Generation Z's digital consumption practices.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how Generation Z interprets ergo-iconic value in local products through digital consumption experience. Drawing on a qualitative interpretive design, the study shows that local product value is not simply embedded in product attributes or fully determined by producer narratives. Rather, it is actively constructed through consumer meaning-making, in which young consumers assess, interpret, negotiate, and articulate product value across digital environments.

The findings demonstrate that ergo-iconic value is formed through the interaction of functional usefulness, symbolic recognition, and digital articulation. Ergo value is interpreted through usability, comfort, reliability, affordability, accessibility, and suitability for everyday consumption. Iconic value is interpreted through local identity, authenticity, visual distinctiveness, cultural narrative, community connection, and lifestyle relevance. Digital articulation enables these meanings to become socially visible through reviews, comments, posts, recommendations, comparison practices, and user-generated content. In this process, local products become meaningful not only when they are useful, but also when they are symbolically credible and digitally communicable.

The article contributes to product value theory by showing that value is not merely an individual evaluation of benefits and sacrifices, but also a socially mediated process of interpretation and circulation. It also contributes to symbolic consumption theory by demonstrating that local products become identity-bearing not because locality is automatically meaningful, but because consumers connect locality with quality, design, authenticity, lifestyle, and social expression. Furthermore, the article refines the concept

of ergo-iconic value by positioning it as a consumer-interpreted meaning-making process rather than only a product attribute, marketing construct, or producer-designed strategy. Practically, the findings suggest that local entrepreneurs and MSMEs should not rely only on local labels, cultural symbols, or digital virality. Local products need to combine practical credibility, symbolic coherence, and digital communicability. Product quality, packaging, accessibility, pricing, storytelling, visual presentation, marketplace presence, and consumer engagement should be developed as connected elements. For Generation Z consumers, support for local products is conditional: local identity may attract attention, but sustained trust depends on whether the product performs well, communicates meaning credibly, and fits contemporary digital consumption practices. This study has limitations. It focuses on Generation Z consumers and local products within digital consumption contexts, so its findings should not be generalized to all consumer groups, product categories, or offline markets. Future research may compare different categories of local products, such as food, fashion, crafts, beauty products, or tourism-related goods. Further studies may also examine how ergo-iconic meaning-making differs across regions, platforms, and consumer communities, or test the proposed model quantitatively to assess the relationships among functional assessment, symbolic interpretation, digital articulation, and consumer support for local products.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors express gratitude to those who have had the pleasure of cooperating during this study or research.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

REFERENCES

- Andriyansah. (2025). Ecological identity and social representation of green MSMEs: Ergo-iconic value, performativity, and representational resistance in the platform economy. *Society*, 13(2), 877–894. <https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v13i2.815>
- Andriyansah, A., & Saputra, N. (2025). Product values in the digital era and the quest for sustainable competitive advantage: A bibliometric mapping of trends. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 15(6), 252–268. <https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.20334>
- Andriyansah, A., Fatimah, F., Hermajiwandini, C. M. D. W., Nurhayati, S., Graciafernandy, M. A., & Nurdiah, N. (2026). Integrating circular economy and sustainable innovation to drive value in ergo-iconic agricultural products. *Ilomata International Journal of Management*, 7(2), 612–619. <https://doi.org/10.61194/ijjm.v7i2.2152>
- Andriyansah, Fatimah, F., Hidayah, Z., & Daud, A. (2020). Meningkatkan kinerja pemasaran hotel dengan memanfaatkan nilai pelayanan ergo-ikonik. *JBMP: Jurnal Bisnis, Manajemen dan Perbankan*, 6(1), 63–68. <https://doi.org/10.21070/jbmp.v6i1.438>
- Andriyansah, Ginting, G., & Rahim, A. R. (2023). Developing the competitive advantage of small and medium enterprises through an ergo-iconic value approach in Indonesia. *International Journal of Applied Economics, Finance and Accounting*, 17(2), 436–444. <https://doi.org/10.33094/ijaefa.v17i2.1196>
- Andriyansyah, A. (2018). *Keunggulan posisional nilai produk ergo-ikonik untuk meningkatkan kinerja pemasaran* [Doctoral dissertation, Diponegoro University]. Diponegoro University Institutional Repository.

- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory: Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868–882. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426626>
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(2), 139–168. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209154>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- DataReportal. (2025). *Digital 2025: Indonesia*. DataReportal.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Djafarova, E., & Bowes, T. (2021). “Instagram made me buy it”: Generation Z impulse purchases in fashion industry. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 59, Article 102345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102345>
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet? *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1), 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.10073>
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Priporas, C.-V., Stylos, N., & Fotiadis, A. K. (2017). Generation Z consumers’ expectations of interactions in smart retailing: A future agenda. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 77, 374–381. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.01.058>
- Sheth, J. N., Newman, B. I., & Gross, B. L. (1991). Why we buy what we buy: A theory of consumption values. *Journal of Business Research*, 22(2), 159–170. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963\(91\)90050-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(91)90050-8)
- Sukendri, N., Andriyansah, Hermajiwandini, C. M. D. W., Lestari, D. A., & Karmanto, G. D. (2025). Viralitas konten media sosial melalui penerapan nilai ergo-ikonik dan dampaknya terhadap pertumbuhan finansial. *Waisya: Jurnal Ekonomi Hindu*, 4(2), 160–171. <https://doi.org/10.53977/jw.v4i2.3162>
- Sweeney, J. C., & Soutar, G. N. (2001). Consumer perceived value: The development of a multiple item scale. *Journal of Retailing*, 77(2), 203–220. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-4359\(01\)00041-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-4359(01)00041-0)
- Zeithaml, V. A. (1988). Consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value: A means-end model and synthesis of evidence. *Journal of Marketing*, 52(3), 2–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298805200302>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

1st Author

Andriyansah is an Associate Professor in the Management Study Program at Universitas Terbuka. He earned his Doctor of Economics degree from Universitas Diponegoro in 2018, after completing his Master of Management degree at Universitas Islam Indonesia in 2004 and his undergraduate degree in Economics at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Widya Wiwaha in 2002. His academic and professional interests include strategic marketing, marketing management, research methodology, digital entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, SME competitiveness, green competitiveness, service value,

customer trust, customer loyalty, and digital payment development. He has been involved in research on sustainable tourism modelling, SME product value and sustainable green competitiveness, hotel marketing performance, customer trust and loyalty, and ergo-iconic service value. He has also contributed to community engagement programs related to digital payment assistance, entrepreneurship mentoring, digital marketing development, tourism English public speaking, village digital governance, literacy and numeracy improvement, and community-based entrepreneurship empowerment. Email: andri@ecampus.ut.ac.id