

Consumer Pre-Purchase Behavior in Indonesian Digital Commerce

Original Article

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital commerce platforms in Indonesia has fundamentally reshaped how consumers engage with the pre-purchase phase of their decision-making journey. While scholarly attention has gravitated predominantly toward post-purchase outcomes, satisfaction, loyalty, and return behavior, the lived cognitive and evaluative experiences of consumers before purchase commitment remain comparatively underexplored, particularly in Southeast Asian market contexts. This study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty-four purposively selected digital commerce users across five major Indonesian cities, to illuminate the meaning-making processes, heuristic strategies, and credibility evaluation behaviors that characterize consumer engagement with price comparison tools and online review platforms. Guided by consumer decision-making theory, information processing theory, and the elaboration likelihood model, the analysis generates four overarching themes: (1) multi-platform search as a reflexive navigational practice; (2) price comparison tool usage as cognitive load management; (3) online reviews as primary trust anchors; and (4) fake review detection as a form of consumer digital literacy. These findings offer nuanced theoretical contributions to the pre-purchase behavioral literature and carry substantive implications for digital platform design and electronic word-of-mouth strategy in emerging markets.

Keywords: Pre-Purchase Behavior, Price Comparison Tools, Online Reviews, Consumer Decision-Making, Digital Commerce, Qualitative Research, Indonesia.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital commerce infrastructure across Southeast Asia has produced a profound reconfiguration of the consumer decision-making landscape, generating complex and dynamic pre-purchase behavioral repertoires that challenge established theoretical frameworks (Song et al., 2023). In Indonesia, the region's largest digital economy consumers increasingly navigate a dense informational environment populated by competing vendors, heterogeneous product offerings, algorithmically curated recommendations, peer-generated reviews, and real-time price comparison affordances. Within this context, the pre-purchase phase of the consumer journey has emerged as a site of significant cognitive activity, strategic heuristic deployment, and interpersonal influence, yet it remains one of the least empirically documented dimensions of digital consumer behavior in the existing scholarly literature (Lim et al., 2023).

Existing research on digital consumer behavior has disproportionately emphasized post-purchase phenomena, including satisfaction evaluation, loyalty formation, complaint behavior,



and product return intentions, while the antecedent cognitive and evaluative processes through which consumers navigate information search, product comparison, and review assessment before purchase commitment have received comparatively limited scholarly attention (Chen & Wang, 2024). This asymmetry is particularly pronounced in emerging digital market contexts such as Indonesia, where the rapid and uneven development of e-commerce infrastructure, the cultural salience of collective social influence, and the heightened consumer concern over product authenticity and vendor reliability create distinctive pre-purchase behavioral dynamics that may diverge substantially from patterns documented in Western market settings (Lim et al., 2023).

Two digital artifacts have been identified in the extant literature as particularly influential in shaping pre-purchase consumer behavior: price comparison tools and online review platforms. Price comparison tools enable consumers to assess cost differentials across multiple vendors simultaneously, theoretically reducing informational asymmetry and facilitating more economically rational purchase decisions (Kumar & Gupta, 2024). Online reviews, as a manifestation of electronic word-of-mouth, provide peer-generated evaluative content that consumers employ to assess product quality, vendor credibility, and purchase risk (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Despite the theoretical significance of these two mechanisms and the growing body of quantitative evidence documenting their statistical relationships with purchase intent, the cognitive and interpretive processes through which consumers actually engage with these digital artifacts remain poorly understood at the experiential level (Zhang et al., 2024). Quantitative operationalizations of price comparison behavior and review engagement capture aggregate behavioral frequencies and self-reported attitude scores but cannot illuminate the subjective meanings, contextual contingencies, and discernment strategies that constitute the lived experience of pre-purchase digital search (Song et al., 2023).

This study addresses this gap through a qualitative inquiry into consumer pre-purchase behavior in the Indonesian digital commerce context. The central objective of this research is to generate a theoretically grounded and empirically rich account of how Indonesian consumers subjectively experience, navigate, and make sense of the informational environment encountered during digital pre-purchase search, with particular attention to the roles of price comparison tools and online review platforms in structuring these experiences. Three specific research questions guide the inquiry: (1) How do Indonesian digital commerce consumers describe and make sense of their engagement with price comparison tools during the pre-purchase phase? (2) What processes of credibility evaluation and interpretive work do consumers employ when encountering online reviews before purchase? (3) How do consumers integrate price comparison information and review content within their broader pre-purchase decision-making processes, and what contextual factors moderate this integration?

By centering subjective consumer experience and employing qualitative methodology to generate theoretically generative accounts of pre-purchase behavioral processes, this study makes several distinct contributions. First, it addresses the documented gap in qualitative examination of pre-purchase digital behavior, complementing the predominantly quantitative orientation of extant research with interpretively rich evidence that illuminates the cognitive and social processes underlying behavioral regularities (Song et al., 2023). Second, it extends the geographic and cultural scope of pre-purchase behavioral research beyond the Western market contexts that have dominated the literature, generating evidence from an emerging

digital economy characterized by distinctive consumer conditions (Lim et al., 2023). Third, it offers theoretically novel insights into consumer digital literacy practices, specifically, the heuristic and systematic strategies consumers employ to evaluate the authenticity and credibility of user-generated review content that have important implications for both academic theory and managerial practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded in three interrelated theories explaining cognitive, evaluative, and social processes in digital consumer behavior. Consumer decision-making theory, developed by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1968) and refined by Blackwell et al. (2001), explains purchasing as a sequence of problem recognition, information search, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. Although digital commerce has made this process more non-linear, the framework remains relevant for understanding online search and comparison behavior (Lim et al., 2023; Song et al., 2023).

Information processing theory by Miller (1956) and Payne et al. (1993) emphasizes that consumers face cognitive limitations when processing abundant online information. In digital commerce, price comparison tools help reduce cognitive load by organizing and simplifying pricing information across vendors (Kumar & Gupta, 2024). The theory also suggests consumers adapt between heuristic and systematic decision-making depending on complexity and perceived risk.

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) explains how consumers process persuasive information such as online reviews. Consumers with high involvement tend to evaluate review quality carefully, whereas low-involvement consumers rely more on simple cues such as ratings and review volume. This framework helps explain variations in review credibility assessment strategies.

2.2. Consumer Pre-Purchase Behavior in Digital Commerce

Research on digital pre-purchase behavior highlights patterns of online search, product comparison, and review consultation. Song et al. (2023) identified multi-platform searching, repeated evaluation cycles, and credibility-based filtering as dominant behaviors among digital consumers. However, most studies remain quantitative, leaving a limited qualitative understanding of consumers' subjective experiences during pre-purchase processes.

Digital intermediaries, especially price comparison tools, play an important role in shaping consumer decisions. Baye et al. (2016) found that such tools reduce search costs and increase market competition, while Popescu et al. (2025) showed that they increase price sensitivity and reduce decision time. Nevertheless, qualitative insights into how consumers interpret and experience comparison activities remain limited (Kumar & Gupta, 2024).

2.3. Online Reviews and Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Online reviews are a major form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) influencing consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Studies consistently identify review valence, volume, and credibility as key determinants of influence, with negative reviews often having stronger effects than positive ones (Zhang et al., 2024). Popescu et al.

(2025) further demonstrated that review sentiment significantly affects purchasing decisions across product categories and cultures.

Review credibility has become an increasingly important issue due to concerns about fake or incentivized reviews. Chen and Wang (2024) found that consumers assess credibility through reviewer identity, review specificity, rating patterns, and seller responses to complaints. Their findings indicate that consumers apply increasingly sophisticated strategies to detect unreliable reviews in digital marketplaces.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs an interpretive qualitative design grounded in constructivist epistemology, which views meaning as socially and individually constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen to explore how consumers interpret and experience pre-purchase digital behavior, particularly in relation to price comparison tools and online reviews, areas that quantitative studies often fail to explain in depth (Song et al., 2023). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to capture detailed participant experiences while allowing flexibility for emerging themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

3.2. Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy recruited 24 participants with experience using price comparison tools and online review platforms (Patton, 2002). Participants were at least 18 years old, lived in Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Medan, or Makassar, and had completed at least three online purchases within the previous three months. Maximum variation sampling ensured diversity in age, gender, education, income, and product interests (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached at the twenty-second interview and confirmed by the twenty-fourth (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between September and November 2024 through semi-structured interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. Fourteen interviews were conducted face-to-face, while ten were completed online. Interviews lasted 45–75 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered digital shopping habits, use of price comparison tools, online review practices, and how participants integrated pricing and review information into purchasing decisions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Transcripts were translated into English and managed using NVivo 14 software. Analysis combined inductive coding with deductive engagement based on the study's theoretical frameworks. Coding was conducted collaboratively by two researchers, while trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, audit trails, and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms (P1–P24) were used to protect identities, and audio recordings were deleted after transcription verification.

4. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the twenty-four interview transcripts generated four overarching themes that together illuminate the cognitive, evaluative, and social dimensions of pre-purchase behavior among Indonesian digital commerce consumers. These themes are presented below, accompanied by illustrative participant quotations and theoretical interpretation.

4.1. Theme 1: Multi-Platform Search as a Reflexive Navigational Practice

The most pervasive finding across interviews was that participants did not experience pre-purchase digital search as a linear or discrete sequence of information-gathering activities, but rather as a fluid, reflexive, and often iterative navigational practice enacted across multiple platforms simultaneously. Participants described moving dynamically between product listing pages, dedicated comparison tools, vendor websites, review aggregators, social media communities, and peer messaging groups in a manner that resisted simple characterization as sequential evaluation of alternatives. This behavioral pattern, which the present analysis terms reflexive navigational practice, was experienced by participants as both cognitively demanding and strategically efficacious, constituting a form of active informational arbitrage designed to maximize the quality and reliability of pre-purchase knowledge.

Participant P7, a 34-year-old marketing professional from Jakarta who regularly purchased consumer electronics online, articulated this multi-platform orientation in the following terms: she explained that before purchasing anything significant, she would typically begin by searching broadly on a general e-commerce platform, then move to a price comparison site to understand the price range, then search for detailed reviews on a dedicated review forum, and frequently consult a community group on a messaging application where members with relevant experience would share their assessments. She emphasized that she rarely felt she had enough information from any single source to feel confident in her decision.

This account resonates with the theoretical proposition that digital consumers engage in non-linear, iterative information search patterns that diverge substantially from the sequential stage model of classical consumer decision-making theory (Song et al., 2023). Consistent with information processing theory, participants appeared to develop idiosyncratic navigational sequences that reflected learned heuristics for managing cognitive load in information-rich environments (Payne et al., 1993). Participants with greater digital commerce experience tended to describe more efficient and targeted navigational sequences, suggesting that prior experience contributes to the development of optimized search heuristics over time. Conversely, participants with less experience reported more exploratory and effortful search patterns characterized by greater uncertainty about where and how to find reliable pre-purchase information.

4.2. Theme 2: Price Comparison Tool Usage as Cognitive Load Management

A second prominent theme concerned the role of price comparison tools in participants' pre-purchase behavioral repertoires. Contrary to the implicit assumption in much extant research that price comparison is a universal feature of digital pre-purchase behavior, participants revealed markedly varied and contextually contingent engagement with comparison tools, with usage patterns shaped by product category, purchase stakes, available time, and prior negative experiences with pricing volatility.

Participants consistently described price comparison tool usage not as an end in itself but as a strategy for managing the cognitive demands of evaluating pricing information across the large number of vendors typically available in Indonesian digital commerce platforms. Participant P12, a 28-year-old graduate student from Bandung who described herself as a price-conscious consumer, explained that without a comparison tool, checking prices on multiple platforms separately would take far too much time, and she would inevitably miss some of them. She said that the comparison tool essentially does that work for her, allowing her to focus her cognitive attention on the review quality and product specifications rather than the mechanics of price discovery. This functional account closely parallels the theoretical characterization of price comparison tools as cognitive load reduction instruments advanced by Kumar and Gupta (2024).

However, participants also described a less theoretically anticipated phenomenon: what several termed comparison fatigue, a state of diminished decision confidence and increased cognitive frustration arising from exposure to excessive pricing information. Participant P19, a 41-year-old small business owner from Surabaya, recounted an experience of searching for a commercial printer in which the price comparison tool returned results from over thirty vendors with overlapping and sometimes contradictory pricing structures. He described the experience as overwhelming rather than clarifying, noting that he eventually abandoned the comparison process and instead relied entirely on a recommendation from a trusted professional contact. This account invites theoretical engagement with Iyengar and Lepper's (2000) paradox-of-choice proposition, suggesting that the cognitive load reduction benefits of comparison tools may be contingent upon the number of alternatives presented, and may reverse into decision paralysis when the presented choice set exceeds consumers' processing capacity.

Product involvement emerged as a significant moderating condition in participants' accounts of comparison tool usage, with systematic and effortful price comparison consistently described as triggered by high-stakes, high-involvement purchase decisions, particularly electronics, appliances, and furniture, and as absent or perfunctory for lower-involvement, routinized, or impulse purchase categories. This pattern aligns with the elaboration likelihood model's prediction that the depth and effortfulness of information processing are regulated by the motivational salience of the decision at hand (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

4.3. Theme 3: Online Reviews as Primary Trust Anchors

Participants uniformly characterized online reviews as the most influential source of pre-purchase information in their decision-making repertoires, consistently positioning review content as a primary trust anchor without which purchase commitment would feel unjustifiably risky. This characterization was expressed with particular intensity in relation to vendors with whom participants had no prior transaction history, suggesting that review reliance functions as a compensatory trust mechanism in the absence of established relationship-based familiarity (Lim et al., 2023).

Participants described a hierarchical weighting of review characteristics in their credibility assessment processes, with review specificity, the degree to which review content provides concrete, verifiable descriptive detail about the product and transaction experience, consistently identified as the most influential credibility cue. Participant P3, a 45-year-old teacher from Makassar who had recently purchased a smartphone online for the first time, explained that she learned not to trust reviews that simply said something like 'good product' or 'fast delivery,' because those could be written by anyone about anything. What she trusted were reviews that described specific details: the exact color of the product as received, how the packaging looked when it arrived, whether the charging speed matched the specifications, and whether the seller responded to a question she had sent before purchasing. She noted that reviews written at that level of detail seemed like they were written by real buyers.

This finding extends and provides experiential grounding for Chen and Wang's (2024) qualitative investigation of credibility assessment strategies, which similarly identified content specificity as a salient credibility cue in consumer review evaluation. The elaboration likelihood model offers a theoretically coherent account of this pattern: under conditions of high product involvement, which characterized most participants' descriptions of significant online purchases, consumers engage in central route processing of review content, applying effortful scrutiny to argument quality and evidential specificity rather than relying on peripheral heuristic cues such as reviewer rating or aggregate review score (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The disproportionate influence of negative reviews was a recurring finding across participant accounts, with participants consistently reporting that a small number of highly specific negative reviews could outweigh a substantially larger volume of positive reviews in their overall assessment of a product or vendor. Participant P21, a 32-year-old engineer from Jakarta, described this asymmetry explicitly: he explained that if he sees fifty positive reviews and three negative reviews, he reads the negative reviews far more carefully than the positive ones. He reasoned that the negative reviewer has nothing to gain from being dishonest, whereas positive reviewers might have received an incentive. This reflexive negativity bias, which participants frequently articulated as a conscious and deliberate heuristic rather than an automatic cognitive response, is consistent with the behavioral economics literature on negativity bias and loss aversion but suggests a more sophisticated, metacognitive relationship with this bias than is typically implied by behavioral accounts (Zhang et al., 2024).

4.4. Theme 4: Fake Review Detection as Consumer Digital Literacy

A fourth and theoretically novel theme concerned the sophisticated strategies participants employed to identify and discount reviews they suspected to be inauthentic, whether generated by automated systems, incentivized third parties, or the vendors themselves. The prevalence and sophistication of these fake review detection practices across participants of diverse demographic profiles suggest that a substantial degree of consumer digital literacy with respect to review authenticity assessment has developed among Indonesian digital commerce users, constituting a form of practical epistemic competence that has not been systematically documented in the extant literature.

Participants described a diverse repertoire of authenticity heuristics, including assessment of the temporal clustering of reviews (multiple reviews appearing within a short period raising suspicion of coordinated seeding), evaluation of reviewer account history (recently created accounts with few reviews and sparse transaction histories being treated with heightened skepticism), identification of linguistic patterns characteristic of formulaic or machine-generated text (generic phrasing, absence of specific product details, and implausibly uniform positive sentiment), and examination of the overall rating distribution (products with exclusively five-star ratings being viewed with greater suspicion than those displaying a more naturally distributed range of ratings).

Participant P16, a 26-year-old graphic designer from Bandung, described her authenticity assessment process with particular clarity: she explained that she had learned to check whether the reviews were all written within two weeks around the same time, because that usually indicates someone purchased fake reviews for a product launch. She also noted that she looks for reviews that mention things going wrong with the product, even small things, because real customers will always have something critical to say. If every review is perfect, she becomes suspicious rather than reassured. This account reflects a sophisticated epistemic awareness of the incentive structures governing the production of online reviews, an awareness that transforms the review evaluation process from passive information consumption into active interpretive labor.

This theme has important theoretical implications for the conceptualization of online review influence on consumer decision-making. The elaboration likelihood model's account of central and peripheral route processing does not fully capture the metacognitive complexity of participants' review engagement, their explicit awareness of the persuasive intent and potential inauthenticity of review content, and their active deployment of authenticity heuristics as a counter-persuasion strategy (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Future theoretical development might productively incorporate the concept of consumer digital literacy, defined here as the practical competence to evaluate the authenticity, credibility, and strategic intent of digital information sources as a theoretically significant variable moderating the relationship between review engagement and purchase intent.

4.5. Discussion

The findings of this study collectively generate a theoretically enriched and empirically grounded account of the cognitive, evaluative, and social processes characterizing consumer pre-purchase behavior in Indonesian digital commerce. Taken together, the four themes identified in the analysis illuminate the experiential complexity of digital pre-purchase search in ways that extend, qualify, and in some instances challenge the theoretical propositions and empirical findings of prior research.

The conceptualization of multi-platform search as a reflexive navigational practice represents a contribution to the theoretical literature on digital consumer decision-making, extending Song et al.'s (2023) systematic review observation that consumers engage in non-linear, iterative search patterns with a richer phenomenological account of the subjective experience and strategic intentionality underlying these behavioral regularities. The finding that participants developed idiosyncratic but learned navigational sequences for managing informational complexity suggests that pre-purchase digital search is better understood as a form of situated practical competence than as a series of discrete information-gathering stages, a characterization with implications for how digital platform designers conceptualize and support the consumer's informational journey.

The identification of comparison fatigue as a consequential phenomenon in high-choice price comparison contexts provides experiential grounding for the theoretical paradox-of-choice proposition (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) in the specific domain of digital price comparison, and suggests that the cognitive load reduction benefits of price comparison tools are not unconditional but are moderated by the size and complexity of the choice set presented. This finding has direct managerial implications for price comparison platform design: interfaces that present an unmanageable volume of vendor options may inadvertently undermine the decision facilitation function that motivates consumer engagement with comparison tools, suggesting a need for intelligent result filtering, relevance ranking, and progressive disclosure mechanisms that help consumers identify a manageable consideration set without sacrificing the coverage that motivates comparison tool usage in the first place.

The characterization of online reviews as primary trust anchors among Indonesian digital commerce consumers and the finding that review influence may be particularly pronounced in this market context relative to comparable findings in Western settings invites theoretical engagement with the role of institutional trust and market development in moderating consumer reliance on peer-generated information (Lim et al., 2023). In contexts where formal consumer protection institutions are less developed, brand familiarity is more limited, and the risk of product misrepresentation is perceived as elevated, consumers may rationally allocate greater weight to peer-generated evaluations as a substitute for institutional trust mechanisms, a dynamic that has important implications for understanding the conditions under which eWOM influence is likely to be particularly salient (Popescu et al., 2025).

Perhaps the most theoretically novel contribution of this study is the conceptualization of fake review detection as a form of consumer digital literacy. The sophistication and diversity of the authenticity heuristics described by participants across demographic backgrounds suggest that consumer competence in evaluating the credibility and authenticity of online reviews may be more advanced and more widely distributed than is typically assumed in the extant literature. This finding challenges theoretical accounts that position consumers as

relatively passive recipients of eWOM influence, and invites reconceptualization of the consumer-review relationship as one characterized by active interpretive engagement, metacognitive awareness, and strategic counter-persuasion (Zhang et al., 2024; Chen & Wang, 2024). It also raises important questions about the arms race between sophisticated fake review generation and consumer authenticity detection, and about the implications of this dynamic for the informational value and trustworthiness of user-generated content in digital commerce ecosystems.

5. Conclusion

This study has employed qualitative methodology to generate a theoretically grounded and experientially rich account of consumer pre-purchase behavior in Indonesian digital commerce, with particular attention to the roles of price comparison tools and online review platforms in structuring consumers' informational navigation, trust evaluation, and purchase decision processes. The four themes generated through thematic analysis multi-platform search as reflexive navigational practice, price comparison as cognitive load management, online reviews as primary trust anchors, and fake review detection as consumer digital literacy collectively advance theoretical understanding of pre-purchase digital behavior beyond what quantitative approaches alone have been able to illuminate.

Several limitations of the present study warrant acknowledgment. The purposive sample, while selected to achieve maximum variation, is not statistically representative and does not support claims of statistical generalizability to the broader population of Indonesian digital commerce consumers. The self-report nature of interview data introduces the possibility of retrospective bias and social desirability effects, and the reliance on participants' verbal accounts of cognitive processes cannot provide direct access to the actual cognitive mechanisms involved in pre-purchase evaluation (Song et al., 2023). Future research should seek to complement qualitative interview evidence with observational data, including screen recordings of actual pre-purchase search sessions, think-aloud protocols, and digital behavioral trace data, to generate more ecologically valid accounts of pre-purchase cognitive processes.

From a managerial perspective, the findings indicate that e-commerce platform operators and digital marketers should attend to the quality, specificity, and perceived authenticity of user-generated review content as a primary determinant of consumer trust and purchase intent. Investment in robust review authenticity verification mechanisms, transparent reviewer identity disclosure systems, and structured review formats that elicit specific and verifiable product information would be likely to enhance the trust value of review ecosystems and reduce the epistemic burden placed on consumers by the need for individual authenticity assessment. Price comparison platforms, meanwhile, should attend to the cognitive load implications of their result presentation formats, developing interface designs that support efficient consideration set formation without inducing the comparison fatigue documented in this study.

Future research should extend this qualitative examination to additional Southeast Asian markets, examine how pre-purchase behavioral strategies evolve with digital commerce experience and market maturity, and investigate the implications of emerging artificial intelligence-driven recommendation and review generation technologies for consumer trust, digital literacy, and pre-purchase decision quality.

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