

Viral Product Consumption as an Expression of Consumer Culture among Generation Z Female Students at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh

*Aulia Raysa Yani¹, Suci Fajarni²

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: auliaraysa544@gmail.com

Abstract

Social media has made viral product consumption increasingly embedded in the everyday lives of Generation Z university students. However, existing research has more often examined consumer behavior through structural variables than students' interpretations of consumption as a social practice. This study examines consumer culture among Generation Z female students at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh by identifying their recurrent consumption patterns, the social, digital, personal, and financial conditions shaping those practices, and the meanings they attach to consumption across campus and digital environments. The study employed a qualitative case study design involving 11 female students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically through repeated reading, initial coding, cross-participant comparison, category development, and theme refinement. The findings identified fashion, skincare and makeup, and food as the principal categories of viral product consumption. Fashion carried the strongest symbolic value because it was readily displayed and evaluated across campus and digital environments. Skincare and makeup consumption combined concerns about appearance and confidence with assessments of product suitability, whereas food purchases were approached more selectively because of concerns about quality, safety, and delivery risks. Consumption practices were shaped by spontaneous purchasing, peer relationships, repeated social media exposure, influencer recommendations, and family financial support. Participants interpreted consumption as a means of constructing self-image, strengthening confidence, maintaining social acceptance, establishing digital presence, and rewarding themselves in response to academic and social pressures. The study shows that viral product consumption functioned as an everyday symbolic practice shaped by the interaction of digital exposure, campus relationships, and access to financial resources.

Keywords: *Consumer Culture; Generation Z; Viral Products; Social Media; Symbolic Consumption; Female University Students*

A. Introduction

Globalization and digitalization have substantially altered consumption patterns, including those of university students (Aldila et al. 2025). Consumption is no longer understood solely as the fulfillment of functional needs but has increasingly become associated with lifestyle, self-image, and social presence (Aulia et al. 2025). Social media contributes to the formation of a consumer culture oriented toward visual representation, status symbols, and social recognition (Ningsih et al. 2025). Within this context, consumer behavior has become increasingly visible in the purchase and use of lifestyle products, particularly viral fashion, skincare, makeup, and food products.

In this study, consumer culture refers to recurrent consumption practices that extend beyond the utilitarian functions of goods and become part of the social meanings constructed in students' everyday lives. It involves not only purchasing but also the ways products are selected, used, interpreted, and displayed as symbols of identity, status, and social presence. Consumer culture therefore differs from individual consumer behavior or lifestyle preferences because it reflects social norms, environmental pressures, and meanings formed through students' interactions with digital media, peer groups, and the university environment.

In this study, viral products refer to goods that participants repeatedly encountered through widely circulated social media content, influencer reviews, peer discussions, algorithmic recommendations, or rapidly increasing online visibility. The term refers to products perceived by participants as popular or widely discussed in their digital environments rather than to products whose level of virality was measured through platform analytics.

Consumer behavior among Generation Z is characterized by the recurrent and potentially excessive consumption of products, services, or brands, whether undertaken consciously or otherwise (Fungky et al. 2022). This tendency is closely associated with Generation Z's position as digital natives who are highly responsive to visual content and viral trends (Romadhona et al. 2025). Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, along with digital marketplaces, function not only as channels of communication and commerce but also as spaces in which consumption meanings are produced through influencer content, algorithms, and promotional strategies (Maula and Ulya 2025). These conditions integrate the consumption of viral products into students' everyday practices in both digital and campus environments. These broader tendencies provide a relevant context for examining the consumption practices of Generation Z female students at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. As in other university settings, their everyday lives are situated within interconnected campus relationships, social media use, and access to digital marketplaces, although the meanings they attach to viral products require empirical examination.

Previous studies have examined Generation Z's consumer behavior from several perspectives. Akhiruddin et al. (2025) found that consumption in higher education has shifted from functional use toward self-expression, social image construction, and identity formation. Pebrianti et al. (2025) examined Generation Z's consumer behavior on Shopee and positioned consumption as part of lifestyle and as a symbol of sociocultural values. Other studies have addressed the influence of social media, influencers, social conformity, and fear of missing out (FOMO) on Generation Z's consumer behavior, particularly their tendency toward impulsive purchasing (Fungky et al. 2022; Ningsih et al. 2025; Sa'idah et al. 2025). Widyadhana et al. (2024) similarly found that university students demonstrated strong preferences for fashion and other lifestyle products through online and offline shopping experiences shaped by promotions and digital trends.

Research has also examined particular categories of consumption. Lestari and Widayati (2022) found that cosmetic use among adolescent girls was influenced by appearance-related needs and prevailing social standards, making skincare and makeup prominent categories of consumption. This body of research indicates that consumption decisions involving appearance-related products are embedded in broader patterns of lifestyle and social presentation. Other quantitative studies have analyzed consumer behavior through structural variables such as digital marketing, lifestyle, peer environments, and economic literacy (Kurniawan et al. 2025; Fadillah et al. 2025). Although previous studies have identified the influence of lifestyle, digital marketing, peer environments, social media, economic literacy, and impulsive purchasing on Generation Z consumption, fewer studies have examined how these influences converge in students' everyday decisions to purchase, use, reject, and display different categories of viral products. Existing research has also provided limited comparison of why fashion, skincare and makeup, and food may carry different practical, emotional, and symbolic meanings across interconnected campus and digital settings. The context of UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh provides a situated case through which these variations can be examined among female students at an Indonesian Islamic university.

Against this background, this study examines consumer culture among Generation Z female students at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, with particular attention to their consumption of viral products. It analyzes the recurrent forms of consumption found in participants' everyday lives, the social, digital, personal, and financial conditions shaping those practices, and the meanings attached to consumption in campus and digital environments. The analysis focuses on fashion, skincare and makeup, and food as the product categories that appear most prominently in the participants' consumption practices.

The article approaches the consumption of viral products as a symbolic social practice rather than a purely functional or individually determined activity. It argues that the consumer culture of Generation Z female students is shaped by the interaction of digital exposure, peer relationships, influencers, and family financial support. Students also interpret consumption as a means of constructing self-image, affirming social presence, obtaining social recognition, adjusting to campus relationships, and rewarding themselves in response to academic and social pressures. By examining fashion, skincare and makeup, and food within the same qualitative case, the study shows that viral consumption does not carry a uniform meaning across product categories. Its contribution lies in explaining how product visibility, bodily suitability, distribution risk, peer recognition, and digital display shape different forms of consumption among Generation Z female students in a specific campus setting.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The case was bounded by institutional setting, participant group, and research focus: female Generation Z students enrolled at UIN Ar-Raniry who had recurrent experience purchasing or consuming products that became popular through social media. The design was used to examine how consumption practices were formed and interpreted within the interconnected contexts of campus relationships, social media exposure, and access to family financial resources.

The participants were 11 female students selected through purposive sampling. Eligibility criteria included being 18–24 years of age, being actively enrolled at UIN Ar-Raniry, regularly using social media, and having recurrent experience purchasing or consuming products that had become popular through social media. Participants were recruited from several faculties to capture variation in academic background and purchasing frequency. Eleven participants were included to provide variation in academic background and reported online purchasing frequency while maintaining the focused scope of the qualitative case study.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics

No.	Participant	Age	Faculty	Online purchasing frequency per month
1	Awa	20	FDK	3–4 times
2	Aina	20	FSH	3–4 times
3	Rahma	21	FST	2–3 times
4	Qisti	18	FISIP	2–3 times
5	Riska	18	FAH	3–6 times

6	Tina	19	Psychology	2-3 times
7	Nada	20	FST	3-4 times
8	Abidah	21	FEBI	3-4 times
9	Ayu	20	Tarbiyah	2-3 times
10	Nana	20	FST	3-4 times
11	Difa	19	Psychology	5-7 times

The empirical data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews elicited participants' accounts of their purchasing practices, product preferences, exposure to viral content, social influences, family financial support, and the meanings they attached to consumption. All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, and the excerpts presented in the article were translated into English while preserving their original meanings.

The interview data were analyzed thematically. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to identify statements relevant to purchasing practices, product categories, social and digital influences, and the meanings attached to consumption. Initial codes were assigned to recurring experiences, including repeated social media exposure, price comparison, peer recommendations, product suitability, anticipated social judgment, digital display, self-reward, and financial concern. Related codes were then compared across participants and organized into broader categories. These categories were reviewed against the interview material and refined into themes concerning variations across product categories, the social and digital conditions shaping consumption, and the symbolic and emotional meanings attached to purchasing and displaying products. Attention was also given to divergent accounts, such as participants who did not regard makeup as necessary or who preferred purchasing food directly rather than online.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

1) Product-Specific Patterns of Viral Consumption

Fashion emerged as the most prominent category of consumption. Participants purchased clothing not only for everyday use but also in preparation for campus activities, organizational events, trips, reunions, and weddings. Some purchases were made before an event had been scheduled with certainty. Difa, for example, reported buying clothes for future trips so that she would not need to decide what to wear later. Riska described a similar practice of purchasing clothing in advance for anticipated social activities.

Participants generally discovered fashion products through social media and completed their purchases through e-commerce platforms. Nana reported encountering products through social media before searching for them on e-

commerce platforms that offered lower prices or promotional discounts. Nada and Abidah also compared prices across platforms before completing a purchase. This pattern indicates that social media primarily served as a space for product discovery, while e-commerce platforms facilitated price comparison and transactions.

Price was also used to assess clothing quality. Ayu considered approximately IDR 90,000 to be the minimum price for clothing she regarded as good quality. Abidah, Riska, and Difa expressed similar reservations about less expensive clothing because the materials, durability, or actual appearance might differ from the product displayed online. However, purchasing decisions were not based on price alone; participants also considered the intended use, available promotions, and the perceived suitability of an item for their appearance.

Participants differed in how frequently they considered new clothing necessary. Rahma and Qisti described becoming more selective and using *mix-and-match* strategies to create different appearances from clothing they already owned. By contrast, Riska and Difa expressed greater concern about wearing the same clothes within a short period, particularly when those clothes had already appeared in social media posts. These differences indicate variation in how participants managed the relationship between clothing ownership, repeated use, and appearance.

Participants generally regarded skincare as a form of basic facial care, whereas makeup was more closely associated with concealing perceived imperfections and preparing one's appearance for social interaction. Aina and Qisti reported that family members had introduced them to skincare before they considered makeup necessary. During this initial period, family members recommended or selected products they regarded as safe.

As participants became more independent, skincare selection involved repeated experimentation. Recommendations from friends encouraged them to try products that appeared effective for others, but the results varied according to individual skin conditions. Tina explained:

"Sometimes a product works well for a friend but does not suit us. We have to try different products, and sometimes a product actually makes the acne worse."

Abidah reported purchasing a recommended product that proved unsuitable for her skin, while Ayu stated that a product she tried worsened her acne. Nana and Nada described comparable experiences of changing skincare products after encountering adverse reactions. Product selection therefore involved a repeated process of trying, evaluating, discontinuing, and replacing products until participants found one they considered compatible with their skin.

Experiences with acne and skincare incompatibility also encouraged some participants to use makeup. Awa initially used makeup experimentally after

seeing other people use it. She continued because the result made her face appear neater and increased her confidence during campus activities. Abidah and Nada similarly used makeup to conceal acne or improve their readiness for social interaction.

Participants nevertheless differed in the importance they assigned to makeup. Awa, Abidah, and Aina regarded it as an important means of supporting confidence, whereas Riska and Ayu did not consider it essential. Riska explained:

"I remain confident even when I have acne, so makeup is not a primary need for me. I believe that confidence does not come only from outward appearance but also from how we carry ourselves. Makeup is an additional option rather than something compulsory."

Views about price also varied. Abidah, Nada, Aina, Awa, and Nana associated higher prices with better ingredients and product quality. Riska, Tina, and Ayu, however, maintained that affordable products could provide satisfactory results when compatible with the user's skin. Product suitability therefore remained a central consideration in skincare and makeup consumption.

Interest in viral food products commonly began with repeated exposure to advertisements, reviews, and promotional content on social media. Nana reported becoming interested in products that repeatedly appeared on her social media feed and received favorable reviews from other consumers. Occasional exposure did not produce the same response. Ayu stated, "If it appears on my FYP only occasionally, I am not interested in buying it."

The food products purchased through e-commerce were generally practical, easy to prepare, and suitable for storage. They included instant seblak, basreng, and packaged chili sauce. Nana explained that such products were useful "when there is no side dish, because they can be added to the meal." Some participants purchased these products in quantities that could be consumed over a longer period.

Not all participants preferred purchasing food online. Some chose nearby sellers because direct purchasing allowed them to examine the product's condition and quality. Aina stated, "I prefer buying food directly rather than online." Concerns about food becoming stale or damaged during delivery made participants more cautious about buying food through e-commerce. Compared with fashion, online food consumption was therefore more selective and more strongly shaped by considerations of quality, safety, and distribution risk.

2) Social, Digital, Personal, and Financial Conditions Shaping Consumption

Discounts, limited promotions, and trending products sometimes prompted purchasing decisions that had not been planned. Riska explained:

“When I see a large discount or a product that is currently trending, I sometimes buy it spontaneously without thinking carefully.”

Immediate attraction to a discounted or viral product could temporarily outweigh consideration of whether the product was needed. Participants also described financial concerns after making such purchases. Riska and Tina reported feeling pleased with newly purchased clothing while simultaneously worrying that their allowances would run out quickly. These accounts reveal that spontaneous consumption was followed in some cases by guilt, financial concern, or reflection on whether the purchase had been excessive.

Peer relationships repeatedly appeared in participants' accounts of purchasing decisions. Participants observed the clothing, skincare, and makeup used by their friends and compared these products with their own. Abidah explained:

“When my friends already have a particular product, especially one that is going viral, I feel that I should have it too. I am afraid that people will say I am falling behind.”

Nada similarly reported that repeated exposure to products used and discussed by friends could eventually encourage a purchase even when she did not initially consider the product necessary. The influence of peers therefore operated through direct recommendations, repeated discussion, social comparison, and concern about appearing out of date.

Campus activities also created occasions for consumption. Organizational involvement, social gatherings, trips, and formal events encouraged participants to prepare clothing and other appearance-related products. Consumption was consequently connected to participation in campus social life as well as to individual preferences.

Social media served as the principal space in which participants encountered viral products. Repeated appearances on TikTok and other platforms created familiarity and curiosity. Difa explained:

“I first learned about the product from TikTok. Because it repeatedly appeared on my FYP, I became curious and eventually bought it.”

Social media also communicated which products and styles were perceived as current. Riska stated, “If I do not have an item that is trending on social media, I feel as though I am not up to date.” Participants nevertheless did not respond uniformly to all promotional content. Repeated exposure was more likely to generate interest than occasional exposure, while personal preference, price, product suitability, and perceived risk continued to shape the final decision.

Influencers served as sources of product information for fashion, skincare, makeup, and food. Participants paid particular attention to influencers they already followed or admired. Awa stated:

“When my favorite influencer reviews a product and says that it is suitable, I usually become interested in trying it.”

Difa similarly described becoming interested in products after repeatedly seeing influencers use and recommend them. Participants sometimes treated influencer reviews as accounts of personal experience rather than as conventional advertisements. Influencer recommendations were particularly persuasive when combined with repeated exposure, favorable reviews, or the popularity of a product.

Family support, particularly financial assistance, enabled participants to purchase products beyond their academic needs. Participants generally received regular allowances from their parents. Difa and Aina also received additional financial assistance from other family members, including older siblings.

Parents sometimes advised participants to limit their spending, but such advice did not always prevent purchases when financial resources remained available. Purchasing capacity was therefore associated not only with interest in particular products but also with the amount and flexibility of financial support provided by the family.

3) Symbolic and Emotional Meanings of Consumption

Participants associated fashion, skincare, and makeup with confidence and personal readiness. Fashionable clothing helped some participants feel more comfortable participating in campus activities, while cared-for skin and makeup contributed to a sense of preparedness for public interaction. Difa explained:

“When my clothes follow current trends, I feel more confident participating in campus activities. I do not feel inferior to my friends because falling behind a trend sometimes makes me afraid that people will comment on my appearance.”

The meanings attached to appearance-related consumption were not uniform. Some participants used makeup to conceal acne and strengthen confidence, whereas others did not regard it as necessary. Confidence was therefore expressed through different forms of self-presentation, including clothing, skincare, makeup, interpersonal conduct, and campus participation.

For some participants, purchasing and using a product were closely connected to displaying it on social media. Clothing and other appearance-related products became visual content through which participants communicated their participation in current trends. Abidah explained:

“When I buy something, especially clothes, I feel that I have to post it so that other people know I am following the trend. Sometimes I do not want to wear the same clothes again after posting them because I am afraid people will think I do not have other clothes.”

Difa described a similar practice, explaining that clothing lost some of its presentational value after it had appeared on her social media account. Positive

comments and responses increased participants' feelings of confidence and appreciation. Products therefore functioned not only as material objects but also as resources for presenting the self and obtaining social recognition.

Consumption was also associated with acceptance within friendship networks. Participants adjusted their clothing and appearance to expectations they perceived in their social environments. Wearing fashionable clothing reduced concerns about negative comments, while using products similar to those of friends created a sense of belonging.

Riska associated fashionable clothing and social media visibility with acceptance in her friendship network. She explained that wearing new clothes and displaying them online made her feel more visible and recognized, whereas wearing older clothing generated concern about being perceived as out of touch. Acceptance was therefore connected to both physical appearance on campus and visibility in digital environments.

Participants described shopping as a form of self-reward following academic achievement, fatigue, stress, or demanding campus routines. Purchasing a product could provide temporary happiness, relief, or renewed motivation. Tina explained:

"When I am tired or in a bad mood, I shop to make myself happy again. Buying something gives me renewed enthusiasm. At first, it was only entertainment, but gradually it became a habit. Sometimes I realize that my money runs out quickly, but shopping makes me feel relieved, as though it helps me cope with academic stress. For me, shopping is not only about need but also a way of appreciating myself."

Self-reward also contained emotional ambivalence. Riska described feeling more confident when other people responded positively to her appearance, but she also experienced guilt when her allowance was depleted quickly. Consumption as self-reward therefore provided temporary emotional relief while also generating concern about spending and its financial consequences.

2. Discussion

The findings show that consumer culture among Generation Z female students at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh was embedded in everyday practices involving fashion, skincare and makeup, and food. Participants did not necessarily perceive their recurrent purchases as a stable pattern of consumption because individual transactions were treated as ordinary responses to practical needs, trends, or social situations. This normalization is consistent with Susiati et al. (2024), who associate e-commerce, digital payments, and social media with recurrent consumption among Generation Z students. Hafiza et al. (2024) similarly found that repeated online purchasing can become an established part

of student routines. The present findings add that such routines differed across product categories and were shaped by the meanings attached to each product.

The findings can be understood through symbolic consumption, in which products acquire meanings beyond their immediate practical use. Participants did not merely purchase clothing, skincare, makeup, or food as material objects; they evaluated these products according to their capacity to communicate appearance, readiness, belonging, and participation in current trends. However, the symbolic value of consumption was uneven. It was strongest in fashion because clothing was highly visible, repeatedly evaluated in campus interactions, and readily transformed into social media content. By contrast, skincare was evaluated through bodily compatibility, while food remained more closely constrained by physical quality and delivery risk.

Fashion carried the strongest symbolic value because it was highly visible in both campus and digital environments. Participants associated fashionable clothing with confidence, social acceptance, and the ability to appear current within their peer groups. Some were reluctant to wear the same clothing soon after displaying it on social media because its perceived novelty had diminished. This pattern can be interpreted through the concept of symbolic consumption adopted by Nisak and Sulistyowati (2022), in which commodities are consumed not only for their practical functions but also for the social meanings they communicate. Hadisaputra et al. (2025) similarly found that trending products could function as markers of identity and symbolic value among university students. In this study, clothing became a means of presenting the self and communicating participation in prevailing campus and digital trends.

The reluctance of some participants to repeat clothing after posting it on social media suggests that the perceived value of fashion was connected not only to ownership or use but also to novelty within a visible audience. Once an outfit had been displayed and recognized, its presentational value could decline even though its material usefulness remained unchanged. Social media therefore accelerated the symbolic turnover of clothing by converting an item from a wearable object into a documented public appearance. This process helps explain why repeated use could be interpreted by some participants as a risk to perceived variety or social presence.

The participants nevertheless retained practical considerations in their fashion purchases. Social media generally served as the space in which products were discovered, while e-commerce platforms were used to compare prices and complete transactions. This pattern corresponds with Oktaviani et al. (2023), who associate e-commerce with easier transactions unconstrained by time and distance. Participants also considered material quality, price, future occasions, and available financial resources. Consumption was therefore not entirely impulsive: exposure to trends interacted with calculation, perceived product

quality, and anticipated social use. The variation in selectivity across participants further indicates that consumption practices differed according to individual priorities, product use, and available financial resources.

Skincare and makeup followed a different pattern because product suitability and bodily responses remained central to purchasing decisions. Family and peer recommendations encouraged participants to try particular products, but the results varied according to individual skin conditions. Some participants repeatedly changed products after experiencing acne or other forms of incompatibility. Windarti et al. (2022) similarly found that skincare preferences could be influenced by products used within peer environments. In the present study, however, recommendations did not automatically determine continued use because participants evaluated products through personal experience. This finding indicates that skincare consumption combined social influence with individual judgments about compatibility and effectiveness.

Participants also differed in the meanings they attached to makeup. Some used it to conceal acne and feel more prepared for campus interaction, whereas others did not regard it as necessary for confidence. Sukmawaty and Rohmawati (2025) similarly associate perceptions of makeup with personal comfort and self-confidence. The present findings therefore do not support a uniform interpretation of makeup consumption. For some participants, it strengthened confidence and readiness for public interaction; for others, appearance was only one of several ways to establish social presence.

Food consumption was more selective than fashion and beauty-related consumption. Repeated exposure to viral food content generated curiosity, but participants also considered product quality, safety, and the risk of damage during delivery. Maula and Ulya (2025) associate repeated social media exposure with impulsive purchasing, but the findings of this study show that exposure did not automatically produce a purchase. Participants were more cautious when the physical condition of a product could deteriorate during distribution. The influence of viral content was therefore mediated by the practical risks attached to the product category.

The findings also indicate that participants were not passive recipients of digital persuasion. They compared prices across platforms, rejected food purchases considered risky, discontinued skincare products that caused adverse effects, and differed in the importance they assigned to makeup and fashionable clothing. Digital exposure and peer influence generated interest and social pressure, but purchasing decisions remained mediated by personal preference, bodily experience, perceived quality, affordability, and anticipated use.

Peer environments and social media connected these different consumption patterns. Participants observed products used by friends, compared their appearance with prevailing campus standards, and encountered

viral products repeatedly through digital feeds. Peer influence operated not only through direct recommendations but also through anticipated judgment and fear of appearing out of date. Importantly, the pressure described by participants did not always take the form of explicit criticism from friends. In several accounts, consumption was shaped by anticipated judgment: participants imagined that others might regard them as outdated, insufficiently fashionable, or lacking variety. Such anticipation could influence purchasing and posting practices even when no direct negative comment had occurred. The relevant mechanism was therefore not merely interpersonal persuasion but the internalization of perceived peer expectations. This finding is consistent with Sapna et al. (2025), who associate peer interaction with consumer behavior, and Lutfiah et al. (2022), who identify peer encouragement and online shopping access as influences on student consumption. In the present study, campus and digital spaces were interconnected: trends encountered online shaped campus appearance, while products used on campus were subsequently displayed through social media.

Influencers reinforced this process by presenting product recommendations through content framed as personal experience. Participants became interested in products after repeatedly seeing influencers use or review them. Ningsih et al. (2025) describe TikTok as both an entertainment platform and a marketing environment shaped by influencers and viral trends. However, influencer recommendations did not operate independently. Their influence was strengthened when products were repeatedly displayed, discussed by peers, offered at discounted prices, or regarded as compatible with a participant's desired self-image.

The symbolic meaning of consumption was most evident in participants' efforts to obtain recognition and maintain social acceptance. Clothing and other appearance-related products were displayed through social media so that others could see and respond to them. Positive comments contributed to feelings of confidence and appreciation, while the absence of trending products could generate concerns about being perceived as out of date. Nasution and Batubara (2024) similarly associate social media with the presentation of student lifestyle and social presence. The present findings show that recognition moved between physical and digital environments: products were worn on campus, converted into visual content, and evaluated through peer responses.

Consumption was also interpreted as self-reward in response to academic fatigue, negative moods, and social pressure. Participants described shopping as a source of temporary relief, happiness, and renewed motivation. At the same time, purchases could produce guilt and concern about depleted allowances. Sartika et al. (2024) describe shopping as a possible form of emotional escape, while Aprillia and Damaiyanti (2022) note that students may interpret self-reward as appreciation for their academic efforts. The present study reveals the

ambivalent character of this practice: consumption could produce confidence and emotional relief while also generating financial anxiety and reflection on excessive spending. This ambivalence indicates that self-reward was not simply a positive form of personal appreciation. It also functioned as a short-term strategy for regulating fatigue, negative mood, and academic pressure. Because the relief was temporary and could be followed by guilt or concern about depleted allowances, self-reward sometimes reproduced the conditions for further emotional discomfort. The meaning of shopping therefore shifted between reward, coping practice, and financial burden.

Although the study was conducted at an Islamic university, religiosity was not examined as a separate analytical dimension. Religious considerations did not emerge as a recurring theme, but this absence should not be interpreted as evidence that religious values were irrelevant to participants' consumption practices. The institutional setting should therefore be understood as the context of the case rather than as evidence of a distinct religious pattern of consumption. The principal contribution of the study lies in demonstrating that viral consumption varied according to product visibility, bodily suitability, practical risk, and opportunities for social display. Fashion acquired the strongest symbolic value because it moved easily between campus interaction and digital representation. Skincare and makeup combined social influence with embodied evaluation, while food consumption remained more strongly constrained by concerns about quality and delivery. Across these categories, digital exposure, peer relationships, influencer recommendations, and family financial support did not operate as isolated factors but converged in participants' decisions to purchase, use, reject, repeat, or display products.

D. Conclusion

This study found that consumer culture among Generation Z female students at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh was expressed through recurrent consumption of fashion, skincare and makeup, and food. Fashion carried the strongest symbolic value because it was readily displayed and evaluated across campus and digital environments. Skincare and makeup consumption combined concerns about appearance and confidence with individual assessments of product suitability, while food purchases were approached more selectively because of quality, safety, and delivery risks. These practices were associated with spontaneous purchasing, peer relationships, repeated social media exposure, influencer recommendations, and family financial support.

The findings indicate that viral product consumption was not merely an individual economic decision or a response to functional needs. Participants used consumption to construct self-image, strengthen confidence, maintain acceptance within friendship networks, and establish social presence through

digital displays. Consumption also functioned as self-reward in response to academic fatigue and social pressure, although the pleasure and relief it provided were accompanied by guilt and concern about spending. The study contributes by showing that the symbolic meaning of viral consumption was product-specific rather than uniform. Fashion derived much of its value from visibility and social display, skincare and makeup from the negotiation of bodily suitability and confidence, and food from the balance between digital curiosity and practical risk. These meanings were formed through the interaction of campus relationships, repeated digital exposure, influencer content, and access to family financial resources.

The study is limited to 11 female students at a single university and relies on participants' interview accounts. Its findings are therefore specific to the case examined and cannot be generalized to all Generation Z students or Islamic universities. Future research could compare consumer practices across universities, social backgrounds, and student groups or use quantitative designs to examine the wider distribution of the patterns identified here. Further research may also examine how social class, digital literacy, gender, and religious values shape the interpretation and management of consumption in different institutional settings.

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