

Digital natives and deferred payments: A qualitative study of young consumers' e-commerce BNPL behaviors

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Received 24 July 2025

Revised 30 August 2025

Accepted 4 September 2025

ABSTRACT

The swift adoption of Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) options has significantly changed the online shopping experience, particularly among younger demographics, such as Generation Z and Millennials, in Indonesia. Given that many individuals in this age group do not possess traditional credit cards, BNPL has become a favored and easily accessible solution that fits their digital lifestyle. This research examines how the rise of BNPL affects the purchasing choices, financial outlooks, and expressions of identity of younger consumers. The results indicate a transition in consumer behavior that prioritizes convenience, facilitated by digital platforms, where payment methods serve as a form of self-expression and reflect personal lifestyle preferences. The findings highlight the social and psychological aspects of deferred payment systems, offering valuable insights into the evolving dynamics between young consumers and financial innovation.

Keywords: buy now pay later (BNPL), young consumers, consumer behavior, e-commerce

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1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of "Buy Now, Pay Later" (BNPL) as a significant payment method in online retail has significantly altered younger consumers' purchasing behaviors. By allowing payments to be delayed, frequently without interest, BNPL provides the convenience and flexibility that tech-savvy generations, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, demand from their shopping experiences. Accessible on prominent platforms such as Amazon, Flipkart, and various local Indonesian markets, BNPL services such as GoPay Later, OVO PayLater, Shopee PayLater, Kredivo, Akulaku, Traveloka PayLater, Home Credit, Indodana, BRI Ceria, and PayLater BCA have become integrated into numerous online shopping and e-commerce systems.

In Indonesia, BNPL has grown rapidly. According to the 2024 "Laporan Perilaku Pengguna PayLater Indonesia" published by the Financial Services Authority (OJK) (Kredivo et al., 2024), 70.5% of consumers reported utilizing PayLater services in the previous year, a rise from 69.4% the year prior. This growth is predominantly driven by limited access to traditional credit. The data indicate that 85% of Millennials and 88% of Gen Z in Indonesia do not possess credit cards. As a result, BNPL has emerged as a viable, accessible, and attractive option for consumers who prioritize digital channels. The transaction volume reinforces this trend: in 2023, Millennials aged 26–35 represented 44.6% of total PayLater transactions, with Gen Z aged 18–25 closely following. These demographics are also leading to a broader shift in payment preferences, as the use of PayLater and e-wallets (utilized by 74.1% of respondents) experienced significant increases. Overall, the value of PayLater transactions grew by 21.66% year-on-year, reaching Rp 5.54 trillion.

These statistics not only illustrate a change in payment methods but also suggest a transformation in consumer behavior in the retail sector. Digital natives approach shopping with a focus on convenience, speed, and low friction. Research indicates that their choice of BNPL is influenced not only by accessibility but also by social pressures, peer comparisons, and lifestyle factors (Halim et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2024). The psychological allure of deferred payments aligns with their craving for instant satisfaction and control, often superseding careful budgeting and long-term financial considerations.

The BNPL option also presents behavioral risks. Numerous studies have shown that younger consumers tend to engage in more impulsive spending when using BNPL, propelled by targeted advertisements, promotional urgency, and a low perceived cost of deferring payments (Halim et al., 2024; Nyrhinen et al., 2024). Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), along with social media influence, further accelerates the adoption of these services (Laksemiyasa Ditha et al., 2025). Although BNPL may empower some individuals by providing access and flexibility, it also encourages new patterns of overconsumption, particularly among those with limited financial literacy and weak self-regulation.

Despite its increasing popularity and significance, most existing research employs quantitative methodologies, concentrating on debt levels, adoption rates, and financial implications. A notable gap persists in comprehending the emotional, cognitive, and cultural aspects of BNPL usage, especially regarding how young users perceive, rationalize, and articulate their use of deferred payments (Soong et al., 2024; Tan, 2022). Aspects such as identity signaling, convenience orientation, and peer validation have seldom been thoroughly examined.

This study aims to address these gaps by implementing a qualitative methodology to analyze how BNPL influences the behaviors, motivations, and daily decision-making processes of digitally oriented consumers. Instead of focusing on financial outcomes, it prioritizes how young people perceive and understand BNPL within the context of their digital lifestyles. By capturing the subjective meanings associated with deferred payments, this study provides fresh insights into how fintech services are gradually reshaping consumption norms among the youth in Indonesia's dynamic digital economy.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative literature review strategy to investigate how young consumers interact with BNPL services, concentrating on behavioral, psychological, social, and cultural aspects. This

study aims to delve into the symbolic, aspirational, and emotional significance accompanying BNPL practices, particularly among digital natives. Relevant literature spanning 2015 to 2025 was collected from Scopus, Google Scholar, and various other key databases using keywords pertaining to BNPL, consumer behavior, identity, and financial technology. Forty studies were examined based on thematic inclusion guidelines.

To enhance the theoretical foundation of this research, two key frameworks were intentionally chosen: the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The TPB was used to investigate how young consumers' perceived behavioral control, attitudes, and subjective norms impact their participation in BNPL services. This theory aligns with the focus of this study on impulsivity, rationalization, and decision-making processes. Conversely, CCT offers a perspective to examine the symbolic and identity-related dimensions of BNPL usage, especially in connection to lifestyle construction, peer influence, and aspirational consumption in virtual spaces. These frameworks guided both the criteria for inclusion and the thematic categorization approach, ensuring that the behavioral insights were rich in description and firmly grounded in theory.

2.1. Inclusion Criteria

Studies were selected based on the following parameters:

1. Focusing on BNPL services or similar deferred payment options (e.g., installment plans and credit-based fintech tools).
2. Analyzing consumer behavior, especially among young individuals aged 18–35 (Gen Z and younger Millennials).
3. The themes addressed were identity formation, impulsivity, rationalization, peer influence, symbolic consumption, and financial decision-making.
4. Published in peer-reviewed journals or respected academic sources.
5. Offering qualitative insights, conceptual frameworks, or behavioral theories pertinent to the study goals.

2.2. Exclusion Criteria

Studies were omitted if they:

1. Concentrated exclusively on the technical or operational facets of BNPL services (e.g., backend systems and fintech infrastructure).
2. Focused on older demographics or business-related utilization of BNPL.
3. Lacked a behavioral, psychological, or cultural perspective.
4. These consisted of duplicate or abstract-only publications.
5. These were not available in full text.

2.3. Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

Data analysis employed a three-phase thematic synthesis method incorporating both inductive and deductive coding. Initially, 42 studies that fulfilled the inclusion criteria were entered into an Excel matrix for coding. Initial codes were generated through a line-by-line open coding process, highlighting recurring concepts such as “social validation,” “impulse regret,” and “financial autonomy.” In the second phase, axial coding was performed to categorize similar codes into subthemes, partially informed by the TPB and CCT frameworks. Ultimately, these subthemes were structured into six overarching thematic categories that represented more profound behavioral and cultural trends.

1. Lifestyle and Identity: Investigating aspirational consumption, self-presentation, and the symbolic usage of BNPL.
2. Peer Culture and Normalization: Analyzing social norms, peer influence, and the impact of influencers and platforms.

3. Convenience and Impulsivity: Exploring frictionless payments, diminished purchase resistance, and compulsive behaviors.
4. Rationalizing “Smart” Use: Examining how users defend their BNPL practices as financially savvy or responsible.
5. Autonomy vs. Dependence: Considering the dual aspects of empowerment and psychological or financial dependency.
6. Rational, Emotional, and Cultural Interplay: Understanding the convergence of individual decision-making, emotional triggers, and cultural viewpoints.

This thematic framework enables the study to investigate not only the actions of young consumers with BNPL but also the underlying reasons for these behaviors and how such practices reflect broader changes in youth culture, financial ethics and digital consumption.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 BNPL as a Lifestyle Enabler and Identity Expression

3.1.1. BNPL as a Tool for Identity Expression and Aspirational Consumption

BNPL platforms function not only as financial tools but also as cultural facilitators, enabling younger consumers, especially those from Gen Z, to express, explore, and uphold their preferred identities. These individuals often engage in what researchers term aspirational consumption: the practice of obtaining items that reflect the lifestyle or status one wishes to represent, even if they are not financially feasible through conventional methods. BNPL effectively narrows the divide between aspiration and ownership by postponing the discomfort of payment, making high-priced or trend-based products seem more accessible (Halim et al., 2024; Threadgold et al., 2025).

Threadgold et al. (2025) note that BNPL is promoted using gamified, social media-like elements that resonate with Gen Z's frequent digital interactions, portraying spending as a natural extension of online identity. These platforms have evolved into convenient tools and spaces for self-expression, where purchasing is intertwined with one's social storyline. BNPL integrates into the aesthetics and flows of mobile shopping, which is characterized by endless scrolling, tapping, and liking. This reinforces what Threadgold et al. identified as “financialised subjectivities,” where young individuals begin to perceive debt-facilitated purchasing as a normalized, socially acceptable facet of self-expression.

Lestari and Endang (2023) highlight that many students face pressure to uphold a carefully curated image on platforms like TikTok, frequently buying items not just for practical use but for showcasing, to demonstrate trend-awareness and cultural affiliation. In this context, BNPL transcends being merely a payment option; it serves as a means to uphold a “social media-ready” persona.

Husna (2023) positions BNPL as a pragmatic adaptation to the rapid-paced lifestyle of Gen Z, who have grown accustomed to immediate satisfaction and swift accessibility to trends. The ability to swiftly obtain products through BNPL aligns with this lifestyle, reinforcing consumption as both an emotional release and a strategy for sustaining identity. Urfiah et al. (2023) reinforces this perspective in her research on students, observing that those with fluctuating incomes tend to prioritize the acquisition of high-value items for their symbolic importance despite their financial limitations because these products assist in maintaining a specific self-image or lifestyle benchmark.

Nevertheless, the connection between BNPL use and identity expression has not been universally affirmed. Restike et al. (2024) for example, discovered that while factors like financial literacy and impulsiveness significantly impact BNPL usage among Gen Z, lifestyle considerations were not statistically significant. This reveals an essential distinction: not all users are driven primarily by identity or lifestyle motives; for some, practical financial obligations take precedence over sustainability.

Ultimately, BNPL facilitates aspirational consumption by offering young consumers access to coveted items that may otherwise be financially out of reach. It aids identity formation by enabling

purchases that convey belonging, individuality, or social prestige, particularly within a digital culture that appreciates curated and stylized self-representation.

3.1.2 Facilitating Symbolic Consumption: The Role of BNPL in Youth Lifestyle Curation

Symbolic consumption involves buying products not just for their practical use but for the significance they embody, such as status, identity, connection, or emotional significance. For digital natives, BNPL facilitates this type of consumption by eliminating the time and psychological hurdles to acquiring goods through credit. It enables individuals to express their identities, lifestyles, or class ambitions through consumer items, even if they lack the cash flow to do so via conventional methods (Ayhan Gökcek, 2023; Relja et al., 2024b).

Loomis and Cockayne (2025) and Ah Fook and McNeill (2020) indicate that BNPL-driven symbolic consumption is especially noticeable among young women in fashion-centric online retail settings. These shoppers utilize BNPL to partake in social meaning through their consumption, wearing outfits that convey modernity, class, or femininity while dealing with systemic challenges like wage disparities or caregiving responsibilities. Nevertheless, this access comes with repercussions: escalating debt levels and heightened financial instability, particularly when symbolic consumption is fueled by peer influence or social media trends.

Relja et al. (2024a) emphasize how BNPL alters retail psychology by prioritizing experience over affordability. Consumers who use BNPL gain a sense of confidence and empowerment, resulting in a higher inclination to make aspirational purchases. This faith in the platform shifts their attention from whether they can afford an item to whether it matches their envisioned lifestyle or self-image. The immediacy of obtaining goods combined with deferred payment diminishes the perceived risk of indulgence, reinforcing symbolic consumption as a low-friction behavior.

Ayhan Gökcek (2023) interprets this phenomenon through the framework of postmodern consumption, where symbolic significance outweighs functionality. In this environment, BNPL aligns seamlessly with consumers' desires to create a specific image. Items are now purchased not just for utility but are curated as part of an individual aesthetic, particularly in online contexts where visibility is incentivized. BNPL serves as an enabler of this curated persona, assisting consumers in acquiring items that fit their desired aesthetics or class portrayal.

Ajouz et al. (2024) and Raj et al. (2024) note that this symbolic consumption frequently intersects with impulsivity and materialism. The simplicity of using BNPL can lead to compulsive buying patterns, where acquisitions are driven more by the symbolic fulfillment of ownership than by actual necessity. This raises issues regarding sustainability and long-term financial well-being, as the cycle between aspiration, impulsivity, and consumption becomes increasingly challenging to disrupt.

Osman et al. (2024) elaborate on this by showing that BNPL-driven symbolic consumption is influenced not only by internal motivations (e.g., materialism) but also by social standards and a sense of self-efficacy. When Gen Z consumers perceive BNPL as a valid and intelligent method for managing finances and lifestyles, they are more inclined to use it to obtain items that reflect their social and personal identities. While some studies H V 1 (2025) place greater emphasis on BNPL's convenience and decision-making impacts rather than its symbolic aspects, the prevailing view across much of the literature indicates that BNPL services have transcended their role as mere financial instruments. They now function as cultural technologies that shape how young consumers explore, convey and enact their identities in an intensely consumptive digital environment.

3.2 The Normalization of BNPL in Youth Peer Culture

3.2.1 The Impact of Social Norms and Peer Pressure on BNPL Adoption Among Young Consumers

For Generation Z and young Millennials, choices regarding their dependence on BNPL options rarely occur in isolation. Research in Southeast Asia, both qualitative and survey-based, indicates that descriptive norms (“people like me are utilizing BNPL”) and injunctive norms (“my social circle views BNPL as acceptable, even wise”) are strong predictors of the intent to adopt the service.

- Learning from peers and family. Studies in Indonesia reveal that when friends or siblings express positive views about BNPL, newcomers feel more comfortable trying it out, even with low levels of financial literacy; financial decisions are validated through discussions, imitation, and collective problem-solving (Surjandy et al., 2024).
- Pressure from social comparison. Witnessing peers engage in consumption can trigger Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and materialistic aspirations, which subsequently increase the likelihood of individuals using BNPL to “keep pace” (Laksemiyasa Ditha et al., 2025). Similar patterns support the Stimulus Organism Response model, which connects the constant availability of BNPL (stimulus) to enhanced impulsivity (organism), ultimately leading to purchases (response) among Malaysian Millennials (“Buy Now Pay Later Mechanism Trigger Impulsive Purchase Behaviour among Malaysian Millennials Generation,” 2024).
- Consistency across cultures is also important. Data from Malaysia mirror this trend: social influence levels are positively associated with use of BNPL, even when factoring in perceived usefulness and user-friendliness (Yu Jing et al., 2024). Social acceptability acts as a marker of legitimacy that diminishes risk perceptions and concerns over tight budgets.
- Social norms can override caution. In environments where norms are particularly strong, BNPL tends to become the go-to solution for financial gaps, potentially normalizing debt among the youth (Surjandy et al., 2024). Consequently, providers function within, as opposed to outside, peer networks characterized by trust and reputational considerations.

Young users are not simply passive recipients of marketing; they proactively seek advice and conduct comparisons within their peer groups, using the experiences of others as guides for their adoption decisions. BNPL spreads socially in a manner akin to fashion trends through dialogue, imitation and perceived endorsement.

3.2.2 Influencer Culture and the Normalization of BNPL on Social Media

If peers provide the micro-level indicators of acceptability, social media and influencers offer the macro-level cultural framework that positions BNPL as “just another method of payment.”

- Enhancement of social validation. Collaborations with influencers, unboxing videos, and #PayLater haul posts push BNPL content into algorithm-driven feeds, creating the perception that deferred payment is widespread and appealing (Kutbi et al., 2024).
- Inclusive educational support. Platforms in Malaysia utilize reels and stories not only to advertise BNPL but also to clarify it, transforming marketing into informal financial education that portrays BNPL as a clever budgeting strategy instead of a financial burden (Yu Jing et al., 2024).
- Transfer of credibility. By partnering with trusted creators, BNPL brands gain social capital; followers view the service as vetted and low-risk, a phenomenon (Kutbi et al., 2024) called credibility leaching.
- Circular informative content. The educational nature of social media posts, offering tips, testimonials, and comparison charts, makes adopting BNPL feel like a well-informed choice, even if the underlying content is paid promotional material (Yu Jing et al., 2024).
- Acceleration of the trend cycles. Rapidly changing meme cultures reduce the lag between noticing a coveted product and acquiring it through social media. BNPL’s instant checkout aligns perfectly with this pace, integrating deferred credit into the very heartbeat of digital consumerism.

Social platforms have transformed BNPL from a specialized fintech offering into a cultural norm; influencers act as both trendsetters and risk mitigators, facilitating the journey from curiosity to trial to habitual use.

3.3 The Convenience–Impulsivity Trade-off

3.3.1 Reducing Friction, Fuelling Impulse: How BNPL Encourages Spontaneous Consumption

BNPL services diminish traditional purchase barriers by enabling consumers to obtain products without immediate financial impact, which notably shifts consumer decision-making. This seamless approach eliminates a significant psychological hurdle to spending, the moment of financial awareness, and substitutes it with a feeling of delayed accountability. Consequently, consumers are more inclined to make impulsive decisions, especially when they shop online.

Keil and Burg (2023) illustrate through empirical evidence that the presence of BNPL heightens the likelihood of impulsive buying by 13%, indicating that the absence of upfront costs fosters "hasty, premature, and unrefined" choices. Such decisions frequently lead to regret, revealing a disconnect between immediate desires and lasting satisfaction, a typical reflection of present bias as described in the dual-self model of behavioral economics. Within this model, the "impulsive self" takes control during the purchasing moment, while the "reflective self" is left to contend with the repercussions afterward.

Additional research supports this phenomenon by emphasizing the influence of perceived ease and utility. Hegawan et al. (2023) find that while BNPL services enhance consumer satisfaction and post-purchase experiences, they also lure users into spontaneous, emotionally charged purchases. This dual experience, convenience alongside regret, highlights the trade-off between ease and impulsivity: the more effortless the purchase, the less reflective the consumer.

Juita et al. (2023) provide further insight by exploring internal moderating variables like digital financial literacy and self-control. While both factors contribute to limiting impulsive BNPL behavior, self-control is a stronger indicator. This insight underscores that even with financial consciousness, the attractiveness of BNPL can overpower rational thought, particularly among individuals with lower impulse regulation.

Raj et al. (2024) investigate the association between materialism, BNPL, and impulsive purchasing behavior. Their results suggest that although BNPL does not directly lead to compulsive actions, it serves as a mediator between materialistic inclinations and impulsive buying. The allure of easy credit acts as a channel through which materialism manifests behaviorally, prompting users to make purchases driven more by emotional than functional reasoning. The fundamental mechanism through which BNPL promotes impulsive spending originates from its structure: it alleviates payment discomfort, makes high-priced items appear more affordable, and accelerates the checkout experience. These characteristics bypass the consumer's thoughtful evaluation process, creating an environment conducive to impulsive and, at times, regrettable purchasing behavior.

3.3.2 Perceived Behavioral Control and the Habitual Use of BNPL Services

Perceived behavioral control (PBC), a key concept in TPB, pertains to the extent to which individuals believe they can regulate their actions in specific situations. In the realm of BNPL, PBC indicates consumers' assurance of their capacity to manage postponed payments and refrain from excessive credit use. Although the term is not always explicitly mentioned, aspects of perceived behavioral control are evident in various studies. For instance, Juita et al. (2023) demonstrated that self-control, a fundamental internal aspect of PBC, significantly moderates impulsive purchases driven by BNPL. Consumers with greater self-regulation tend to resist the temptations presented by the seamless purchasing experience offered by BNPL.

Hegawan et al. (2023) indirectly address this issue by highlighting that perceived utility and ease of use are linked to satisfaction, but also to the likelihood of making unplanned purchases. This implies that

consumers who overrate their ability to control consequences (for example, by thinking, "I can handle the payments later") may be more prone to engaging in risky consumption behaviors. In a similar vein, (Raj et al., 2024) suggest that consumers with high materialism may think they have control over their purchases, yet their actions reveal a heightened susceptibility to external factors. In these situations, PBC might be a false perception; users believe they are in control, but frequent use of BNPL subtly influences their consumption patterns towards more emotional and impulsive decisions.

Keil and Burg (2023) advance this discussion by indicating that a considerable number of consumers feel regret after making purchases. This points to a disconnect between perceived and actual behavioral controls. The disparity between intention and result suggests that while consumers may trust that they can utilize BNPL responsibly, the ease of this mechanism encourages behaviors they might not have otherwise engaged in with more traditional payment methods. Perceived behavioral control is vital in the context of ongoing BNPL usage, often serving as a mental shield that justifies risky financial behavior. When PBC is both high and accurate, consumers may strategically use the BNPL service. However, when the PBC is inflated, particularly among individuals with low self-control, it fosters a cycle of impulsive behavior and justification, leading to increased reliance on deferred payment systems.

3.4 Rationalizing BNPL as “Smart” and Intentional Consumption

3.4.1 Financial Responsibility Reframed: How Youth Rationalize BNPL Usage

Many users view BNPL as a tool for managing cash flow that alleviates, rather than heightens, financial stress. By dividing a payment into interest-free instalments, they consider the purchase to align seamlessly with their monthly budgets, a perspective that "lessens perceived financial constraints" and boosts feelings of control (Maesen and Ang, 2025). Shoppers with smaller baskets and those who have previously relied heavily on credit cards are particularly inclined to reframe short-term borrowing as smart financial management.

Because most BNPL offerings promote "no fees if you pay on time," users perceive the service as equivalent to interest-free credit, deeming it more economical and therefore superior to carrying a balance on credit cards (Halim et al., 2024). Even with evidence indicating higher overdraft charges and credit card interest for new BNPL users, they tend to minimize or overlook these future costs (deHaan et al., 2024). The cognitive bias at play is present-focused accounting: immediate savings seem concrete, while future expenses remain unclear.

Some consumers argue that BNPL enforces discipline in repayment because of the automatic, timed, and clear installment structure visible in the app interface. They see this as a built-in budgeting tool that encourages "positive financial planning outcomes," especially for hedonistic purchases that might otherwise be made impulsively in full (Suherman et al., 2025). The narrative is as follows: I am not overspending; I am organizing.

For students or gig economy workers with limited credit histories, BNPL is presented as a responsible alternative to predatory lending. However, each justification has blind spots. Evidence of overdrafts, increasing credit card fees, and spikes in impulsive spending (Halim et al., 2024) illustrates that the "smart" framing can obscure long-term risk, what behavioral economists refer to as optimism bias and self-justification.

3.4.2 Youth Beliefs and Attitudes that Shape Favorable Perceptions of BNPL

The favorable view of BNPL among younger consumers is supported by a range of attitudes and behaviors that encourage its use among them. One key factor is perceived usefulness, which is the idea that BNPL serves as a practical financial instrument that improves efficiency and purchasing power. This perception plays a significant role in shaping users' intentions, as those who regard BNPL as advantageous are more inclined to use it regularly (Abed & Alkadi, 2024; Hidayat, 2022). In addition, the perceived ease

of use or effort expectancy enhances BNPL's positive reputation; its user-friendly interface and quick transaction process lower barriers, making the service feel intuitive and reliable.

Social influences and external facilitating factors are also important, as many users discover BNPL through their peers, influencer marketing, or e-commerce prompts like advertisements. These social influences normalize BNPL as a standard payment method and convey its safety and widespread acceptance (Abed and Alkadi, 2024; Kutbi et al., 2024). Hedonic motivation further contributes to the attractiveness of BNPL; the emotional gratification of obtaining desired products without financial delay creates a sense of reward, bolstering users' positive perceptions of the service (Suherman et al., 2025). Additionally, engagement with fintech platforms more broadly influences attitudes, those who display a high level of technology readiness or engage with LendTech ecosystems are more apt to embrace BNPL, indicating that trust in financial technology supports favorable opinions (Waliszewski et al., 2024).

However, these attitudes are complex. While many view BNPL as a savvy and contemporary option, worries regarding overconsumption, particularly among low-income or gendered groups, highlight some underlying ambivalence amid the overall positivity (Loomis and Cockayne, 2025). Despite this, the dominant narrative continues to focus on empowerment and control, a belief system that resonates with young consumers' desires for autonomy in their financial choices.

3.5 Tensions Between Autonomy and Dependence in Financial Practices

3.5.1 BNPL Between Empowerment and Dependency: A Double-Edged Credit Tool

BNPL services present a complex situation in financial behavior: they provide consumers with a feeling of independence while simultaneously creating potential reliance. On the one hand, BNPL enables users, especially young, low-income, or financially marginalized individuals, to obtain immediate access to products and services without upfront costs, thereby enhancing their perceived financial autonomy. The installment payment structure, usually without interest, gives the impression of control over one's budget and helps consumers handle liquidity and cash flow more easily (Jose et al., n.d.; IIIPX, 2023). This aligns with stories of financial empowerment and inclusion, particularly among those who previously had limited access to conventional credit (O'Brien et al., 2024a).

However, this feeling of independence may disguise an increasing reliance on deferred payment methods, particularly for routine purchases. As users become accustomed to the convenience of BNPL, many start depending on these services to maintain a consumption-oriented lifestyle. This becomes especially perilous when combined with impulsive spending habits or insufficient financial literacy, as consumers may overlook the accumulating effects of multiple installment commitments (Halim et al., 2024). For certain individuals, BNPL shifts from being a budgeting aid to a support system for unsustainable spending. Research indicates that new BNPL users are more inclined to experience bank overdrafts and credit card interest fees, implying that the facade of autonomy might hide a trajectory toward greater financial risk (deHaan et al., 2024).

The conflict is notably evident among young women, who represent a significant portion of BNPL users. While these platforms are often promoted as empowering solutions that provide flexibility and ease, feminist critiques suggest they could reinforce gender-specific financial dependency, particularly in situations of economic strain within the household (Loomis and Cockayne, 2025). Therefore, BNPL creates a dual reality: it appears empowering at first glance, but can become entrapping when its utilization becomes commonplace and goes unexamined.

This research has focused on the short-term psychological and cultural attractiveness of BNPL, but it is crucial to also examine the long-term societal and economic impacts of this developing credit trend. Studies by (deHaan et al., 2024) and (O'Brien et al., 2024b) indicate that those who frequently use BNPL are more likely to encounter bank overdrafts, incur late payment charges, and experience declines in their credit ratings, which can ultimately limit their access to conventional financial services. As time goes on, dependence on BNPL may worsen financial exclusion, especially for lower-income individuals who rely on the service to manage daily costs. The increasing acceptance of BNPL as a standard financial

method could change debt management from a deliberate choice to an ingrained habit, heightening the risk of chronic debt among young people.

3.5.2 Balancing Autonomy and Financial Risk: How Digital Natives Navigate BNPL

Digital natives, especially those from Gen Z, often view BNPL as a source of empowerment and convenience, appreciating its capacity to enhance access, support independence, and align with their rapid digital consumption patterns. For this demographic, used to effortless transactions and quick satisfaction, BNPL seamlessly integrates into their financial habits. It seems to alleviate purchasing barriers while fostering a sense of control, particularly in managing personal financial limitations without relying on familial assistance or conventional credit frameworks (Surjandy et al., 2024).

However, this sense of empowerment is accompanied by a certain degree of ambivalence. Many young digital users recognize the dangers of depending too much on BNPL, including the risks of piling up several debts or failing to meet payment deadlines. Nevertheless, they might justify these risks as acceptable compromises in exchange for the convenience and purchasing flexibility that BNPL offers. Factors like low financial literacy, peer influence, and a lack of clear information further intensify this disconnect, leaving numerous young consumers exposed to excessive borrowing while still believing they are making prudent financial choices (Halim et al., 2024; Jose et al., n.d.).

The perceived sense of control is also intricately connected to young consumers' digital financial identities, how they perceive themselves through their capabilities to manage or innovate financial tools. In such a setting, employing BNPL isn't necessarily viewed as a flaw but rather as a clever financial tactic. However, this perspective can cloud awareness of the long-term financial repercussions, particularly when the service is utilized routinely without a comprehensive understanding of debt management (Loomis and Cockayne, 2025; Surjandy et al., 2024). Ultimately, how digital natives perceive BNPL illustrates a complex and dynamic relationship with money, one influenced by convenience and independence on one side, and risk and reliance on the other.

3.6 Interplay of Rational, Emotional, and Cultural Dimensions

3.6.1 Rationality, Emotion, and Culture: Intersecting Drivers of BNPL Behavior

The rising popularity of BNPL services among younger consumers cannot be entirely understood through purely rational economic analysis. Instead, it demonstrates a complex interaction among logical reasoning, emotional responses, and social conditioning. From a rational perspective, users often perceive BNPL as a practical and strategic financial option. It enables them to handle their budgets with greater flexibility by splitting large, upfront payments into smaller, manageable installments, typically without interest. This perceived benefit aligns with logical evaluations of costs and benefits, particularly for those who see BNPL as a way to maintain liquidity or defer payments to coincide with their cash flow (Relja et al., 2024a; Rusdi Hidayat N et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, emotional factors frequently overshadow this rationality in real-world scenarios. Influences such as the need for immediate satisfaction, the urgency of limited-time offers, and the fear of missing out (FOMO) significantly drive BNPL usage. These emotional triggers facilitate decision-making processes and often lead consumers to make impulsive choices. Research has indicated that such emotional shortcuts may result in hasty or regrettable purchases (Ackert et al., 2024; Margalit, 2020).

In addition to these individual psychological mechanisms, wider cultural norms play a role in legitimizing and promoting BNPL use. In nations like Indonesia, the swift rise of digital consumption has fostered a culture that values convenience, quick access, and participation in online trends (Kharisma et al., 2025). In this cultural backdrop, BNPL is viewed not as a risky financial product but as a standard, even anticipated, method of consumption, particularly among Gen Z. Social reinforcement through peer usage, endorsements by influencers, and promotions from platforms further cements its acceptance.

Cognitive biases such as overconfidence (the belief that repayment will always be timely) and optimism bias (underestimating future financial challenges) further distort rational decision-making (Zhu, 2024).

In summary, these insights highlight that young consumers' interactions with BNPL services are influenced by a multifaceted combination of logical reasoning, emotional influences, and culturally ingrained expectations, often intertwining in ways that obscure the distinction between judicious financial management and hazardous consumption behavior.

3.6.2 BNPL as a Mirror of Cultural Shifts in Financial Ethics and Youth Consumption Norms

The increasing prevalence of BNPL among younger populations indicates significant ethical and cultural changes in perceptions of debt, consumption, and financial accountability. Historically, debt was regarded as a significant financial obligation, typically avoided unless necessary. Nonetheless, BNPL has transformed the notion of debt into something more casual, flexible, and even empowering. This change reflects a broader cultural trend that prioritizes immediate financial needs over long-term considerations. Among younger individuals, especially Gen Z, BNPL resonates with a growing culture of hedonistic consumption that emphasizes instant rewards and emotional fulfillment, even if it results in future financial difficulties (Raj et al., 2024; Suherman et al., 2025).

From an ethical standpoint, the growth of BNPL signifies the acceptance of credit reliance as a socially endorsed and technology-enabled approach to achieving desired lifestyles. This is particularly evident in digital economies where consumer behavior closely aligns with identity formation and social engagement. The capacity to acquire the latest trends, gadgets, or experiences without upfront costs makes BNPL especially appealing to young individuals aiming to uphold a certain lifestyle (Coffey et al., 2024; Tan, 2022), indicates a wider cultural shift toward consumer financialization, where routine purchases are facilitated through credit-based systems, making financial decision-making a routine aspect of daily life.

Additionally, BNPL's allure for specific demographics, such as young women or lower-income groups, highlights the socio-economic and gendered aspects of this transition. While BNPL can provide financial accessibility and temporary empowerment, it also risks creating financial instability by making it simpler to enter debt cycles. This complexity necessitates a thorough evaluation of the ethical consequences of fintech products that obscure the distinction between financial assistance and financial jeopardy (Loomis and Cockayne, 2025; O'Brien et al., 2024a).

However, it is crucial to recognize that this cultural shift is not one-dimensional. There are opposing trends, particularly among youths who advocate for sustainable or minimalist consumption behaviors. For example, studies conducted with Polish students showed a notable preference for economic rationality and ethical consumption practices, such as purchasing second-hand items or focusing on durability (SZCZEPAŃSKA, 2024). These contrasting actions imply that while BNPL represents prevailing cultural ideals of immediacy and convenience, it coexists with emerging ethical concerns and alternative value systems centered on mindful consumption.

Ultimately, youth engagement with BNPL is not simply a financial practice but a reflection of wider socio-cultural transformations, from how people interact with money and time to societal views on access, autonomy, and ethical accountability in the landscape of digital finance.

Based on the earlier conceptual discussion, the table below consolidates important academic works that inform this research. Each entry comprises a citation, context of the research, main focus or conclusions, and its significance to the thematic sub-topics examined in this study. This organized overview aims to illustrate how the existing literature frames the BNPL phenomenon and where this research adds by enhancing the understanding of Gen Z consumers' behavioral patterns within e-commerce platforms.

Table 1
List of Literature Review

Citation	Context/ Sample	Key Focus/Findings	Sub- topic(s)
(Threadgold et al., 2025)	Australia, Gen Z	Gamified BNPL UX, trend signalling, “financialised subjectivities”	1
(Aalders, 2023)	UK policy lens	BNPL, “responsible consumer” discourse, -low- income impact	1
(Halim et al., 2024)	Indonesia, Gen Z	Impulsive spending, financial literacy as a buffer	1, 3, 4, 5
(Loomis and Cockayne, 2025)	Feminist finance, UK/US	Gendered use, fashion, and debt critique use,ue	1, 4, 5, 6
(AYHAN GÖKCEK, 2023)	Theoretical	Post-modern symbolic consumption & BNPL	1
(Relja et al., 2024a, 2024b)	Europe, mixed	BNPL trust, retail experience, “savings” framing	1, 6
(Husna, 2023)	Indonesia, Gen Z	BNPL convenience as lifestyle support	1
(Urfiah et al., 2023)	Indonesia, students	Lifestyle pressure, high-ticket items on BNPL	1
(Restike et al., 2024)	Indonesia, Shopee PayLater	Financial literacy & impulsive factors; lifestyle ns	1
(Lestari and Endang, 2023)	Indonesia, TikTok users	Peer pressure, identity expression via BNPL	1
(Osman et al., 2024)	Malaysia, Gen Z	Materialism, social norms shape BNPL intent	1
(Ajouz et al., 2024)	Sustainability lens	Impulse buying + sustainability risk	1
(Ah Fook and McNeill, 2020)	Online fashion, UK	BNPL drives aspirational/impulse fashion buys	1
(Raj et al., 2024)	India, young adults	Materialism → BNPL → impulsive/compulsive buying	1, 3, 6
(H V 1, 2025)	SE Asia e- commerce	BNPL adoption factors (convenience focus)	1
(Surjandy et al., 2024)	Indonesia, Gen Z	Peer/family influence, low financial literacy	2, 5
(Yu Jing et al., 2024)	Malaysia	Social influence & social-media informativeness	2
(Kutbi et al., 2024)	Saudi Arabia	Influencers, service-quality, and fintech attitudes	2, 4
(Laksemiyasa Ditha et al., 2025)	Indonesia	Social comparison, FOMO, BNPL adoption	2
(“Buy Now Pay Later Mechanism Trigger Impulsive Purchase Behaviour among Malaysian Millennials Generation,” 2024)	Malaysia Millennials	External stimuli → impulse via BNPL	2
(Hegawan et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Convenience value → impulsive buying	3
(Keil and Burg, 2023)	EU/US datasets	BNPL ↑ impulse purchases (-13 % friction)	3
(Juita et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Self-control vs digital financial literacy	3
(Maesen and Ang, 2025)	US cardholders	Instalment framing boosts spend, “budget control”	4
(Porwal, 2024)	Global e- commerce	BNPL ⇌ sales lift, wellbeing concerns	4
(deHaan et al., 2024)	US banking panel	users’ ↑ overdrafts & card fees	4, 5
(Hidayat, 2022)	Indonesia	Tech readiness, usefulness → BNPL attitude	4
(Abed and Alkadi, 2024)	Saudi Gen Z	Performance/effort expectancy, continuance intent	4
(Waliszewski et al., 2024)	Poland	LendTech engagement predicts BNPL uptake	4
(O’Brien et al., 2024a)	Australia policy	Inclusion vs hardship; C :ill for regulation	4, 5
(ПІІРХ, 2023)	Russia	BNPL autonomy vs late-fee risk	5

Citation	Context/ Sample	Key Focus/Findings	Sub- topic(s)
(Jose et al., n.d.)	India	Spending patterns, comprehension of terms	5
(SZCZEPAŃSKA, 2024)	Poland students	Ethical/ minimalist consumption tensions	6
(Kharisma et al., 2025)	Indonesia policy	Consumer protection gaps in the digital economy	6
(Zhu, 2024)	Behavioral finance	Cognitive biases in BNPL decisions	6
(Ackert et al., 2024)	US experimental	Loss aversion & cultural scripts in BNPL	6
(Margalit, 2020)	Retail psychology	Intuition > analysis in BNPL settings	6
(Suherman et al., 2025)	Indonesia, students	Hedonism, PayLater, and financial planning	4, 6
(Coffey et al., 2024)	Ireland youth	BNPL, normalization of financialization	6
(Tan, 2022)	Singapore fintech	Algorithmic framing, debt masking	6

Sub-topic numbers:

1 = Lifestyle & Identity; 2 = Peer Culture Normalization; 3 = Convenience–Impulsivity; 4 = Rationalizing “Smart” Use; 5 = Autonomy vs Dependence; 6 = Rational / Emotional / Cultural Interplay

3.7. Discussion

3.7.1. BNPL as a Cultural Operating System for Digital Natives

The evidence examined here positions Buy Now Pay Later as a form of cultural infrastructure rather than just a financial tool. By postponing the emotional impact of payment, BNPL narrows the distance between desire and ownership, enabling young consumers to incorporate high-status items into their curated online personas (Coffey et al., 2024). The effectiveness of this practice lies in its alignment with visual social media platforms: each delayed purchase instantly transforms into content, validation, and currency within peer communities (Lestari and Endang, 2023). Theories of symbolic consumption provide insight into its allure—practicality takes a backseat to the significance that products convey (AYHAN GÖKCEK, 2023), but the data also reveal a notable division based on gender and income. For example, young women focused on fashion utilize BNPL to keep up with swiftly changing trends; however, they disproportionately bear the burden of the accumulating debt (Loomis and Cockayne, 2025).

3.7.2. Social and Algorithmic Diffusion

Adoption is not just a personal decision; it spreads through social dynamics. Discussions among peers normalize BNPL, while influencer content amplifies this normalization on a larger scale. The same algorithmic principles that drive viral memes now facilitate the spread of credit, unboxing videos, #PayLater showcases, and sponsored guide, illustrating to users that BNPL is both common and wise. Such multiple layers of social validation dismantle cautious financial behaviors, shifting deferred credit from being an exception to becoming a standard choice, even for young individuals with low financial literacy or unstable finances.

3.7.3. The Convenience–Impulsivity Loop

Design features that make BNPL appealing also render it risky. The convenience of one-click checkout, zero-interest promotions, and engaging progress bars creates a false sense of control, yet research indicates a significant increase in impulse purchases when BNPL is included as a payment option

(Keil and Burg, 2023). This seamless experience diminishes the reflective pause that could encourage thoughtful consideration of costs and benefits. While users commonly express a strong belief in their ability to manage the installments, “I can handle the payments”, evidence of post-purchase regret and overdraft suggests that this assurance is often unfounded (deHaan et al., 2024; Juita et al., 2023).

Younger users often retrospectively frame their use of BNPL as “smart financial management.” Four common narratives emerge: distributing costs (“budget smoothing”), evading interest charges (“cost minimization”), employing automated payments for self-discipline, and gaining access to credit without traditional barriers (“financial inclusion”). These narratives are not mechanical; they have a basis in reality, but they also serve as mental shields that minimize perceived future risks. Increases in overdrafts and accumulation of fees indicate that what seems like clever optimization can lead to gradual indebtedness, particularly when materialistic values and peer pressure are significant factors (Halim et al., 2024; Raj et al., 2024).

3.7.4. Autonomy, Dependence, and Gendered Debt

At a structural level, BNPL creates a conflict between empowerment and entrapment. For students and gig workers, deferred credit provides genuine autonomy, allowing them to manage unpredictable earnings and engage in consumer culture without needing a credit card (O'Brien et al., 2024a). However, frequent use for daily expenses can quickly turn autonomy into reliance, normalizing a lifestyle based on debt. Research in feminist finance highlights that this cycle is influenced by gender: young women often utilize BNPL to meet fashion demands while earning lower average incomes, ultimately leading to increased long-term vulnerability (Loomis and Cockayne, 2025). Consequently, BNPL serves as both a support and a constraint, with its promise of flexibility overshadowed by the threat of mounting obligations.

3.7.5. A Tri-Lens Decision Ecology

Bringing together these elements highlights a decision-making environment where rational, emotional, and cultural influences collaboratively shape behavior. Logical evaluations of payment amounts coincide with emotional triggers, such as fear of missing out and the urgency of flash sales, and are processed through cultural narratives that value immediacy and visibility (Margalit, 2020; Relja et al., 2024a). Biases from behavioral economics (like present bias and optimism bias) and algorithmic enhancements produce a feedback loop that makes BNPL seem both unavoidable and harmless. Grasping this decision-making environment is the primary challenge our qualitative study aims to address: we can only illuminate the apparent contradiction of feeling financially savvy while gradually moving toward debt dependence by understanding how digital natives articulate and navigate these intersecting influences.

3.7.6. Ethical and Cultural Shifts

Ultimately, the existing literature places BNPL within a wider ethical recontextualization of debt. Credit has shed its stigma; it is now seen as a mainstream and even celebrated instrument for shaping one's lifestyle. However, there are opposing trends. Young individuals who embrace minimalism and sustainability often exercise deliberate restraint, indicating that the cultural landscape is diverse rather than uniform (SZCZEPAŃSKA, 2024). This diversity highlights the necessity for context-specific research, which is the primary focus of this qualitative study.

4. CONCLUSION

In the current rapid-paced digital landscape, Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) has evolved into more than just a shopaholic option, symbolizing how younger generations navigate their identity, independence, and financial stress. For numerous Gen Z consumers, BNPL provides a feeling of empowerment: the

chance to savor life in the moment and defer payments to a later time. However, beneath that allure exists a complicated weave of emotions, social pressures, and cultural changes that can subtly lead to reliance and financial burdens.

This analysis indicates that the use of BNPL isn't solely driven by irresponsibility frequently emerges from a need to gain control, to fit in, or to keep pace. However, the distinction between effective budgeting and financial excess can quickly become unclear, particularly when purchases are influenced by emotions or social factors. Consequently, grasping the BNPL behaviors of young consumers necessitates a focus not only on their purchases but also on the underlying reasons for those purchases and the feelings they evoke.

As BNPL increasingly influences the financial habits of digital natives, it is crucial to move past mere cautionary tales and instead delve into the real-life experiences, societal pressures, and cultural ambitions that drive its adoption. Recognizing BNPL as both a facilitator of lifestyle choices and a possible source of financial risk provides a more nuanced basis for evidence-based interventions. By promoting targeted financial literacy, designing fintech platforms responsibly, and advocating for supportive public policies, all stakeholders can assist young consumers in achieving a healthier balance between independence and accountability. In doing so, we not only tackle current consumption patterns but also enhance the long-term financial resilience and inclusivity for an emerging generation.

Policymakers ought to enforce stricter regulations that mandate clear disclosures of fees, penalties, and repayment conditions on BNPL platforms. Imposing limits on the number of active BNPL accounts and spending caps could assist in preventing excessive debt among younger consumers. Financial service providers need to include in-app prompts, alerts, and spending overviews that assist users in monitoring their repayment obligations and anticipating future financial pressures.

Educational institutions and youth development programs should incorporate financial literacy courses specifically designed for fintech activities such as BNPL usage. Focusing on the psychology of debt, long-term budgeting, and ethical considerations around digital consumption would be particularly beneficial for university students.

Together, these measures can help steer young consumers toward more knowledgeable and sustainable financial practices while maintaining the inclusive advantages of BNPL services.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not obtained for this study.

Author Contributions

Syarifah Aliyah Fitrisam led the study design and project coordination. Muhammad Isra Iradat developed the methodology and performed data analysis. Rizkiani Iskandar conducted the literature review and assisted with interpretation. Ayu Putri Utami revised the manuscript for academic rigor, while Rika Febby Rhamadhani handled final editing and submission. All authors approved the final manuscript, with Syarifah Aliyah Fitrisam as the corresponding author.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy reasons.

Funding

This study received no external funding.

Notes on Contributions

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