



Digital Consumer Culture and Symbolic Consumption: An Integrative Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Contemporary digital society has fundamentally transformed symbolic consumption by shifting consumer interactions from possession-centered practices toward highly visible, platform-mediated identity performances. While symbolic consumption theory has long explained how consumers utilize marketplace meanings to construct and communicate identities, existing frameworks provide limited understanding of how symbolic meanings are translated into behavioral outcomes within digital environments characterized by persistent visibility, algorithmic mediation, and networked social evaluation. Addressing this theoretical gap, this paper develops the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM), an integrative conceptual framework that synthesizes Symbolic Consumption Theory, Consumer Identity Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and Digital Consumer Culture literature. Through a systematic conceptual integration of these theoretical streams, the study reconceptualizes symbolic consumption as a sequential process linking Symbolic Meaning, Identity Projection, Digital Visibility, Social Recognition, Lifestyle Alignment, and Consumption Intention. The proposed framework advances existing scholarship by positioning visibility and recognition as critical intermediary mechanisms through which symbolic meanings acquire behavioral relevance in digital contexts. The DSCM contributes a contemporary theoretical lens for understanding consumption within platform societies and provides a foundation for future empirical research examining identity performance, symbolic value creation, and consumer behavior across emerging digital ecosystems.

Keywords

symbolic consumption; digital consumer culture; consumer identity theory; digital visibility; social recognition; consumption intention

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1. Introduction

Contemporary consumption has increasingly transcended its traditional utilitarian function and evolved into a symbolic process through which individuals construct, communicate, and negotiate identities. Consumers do not merely acquire products and services to satisfy functional needs; they also consume meanings associated with status, lifestyle, values, social belonging, and self-expression. Consequently, symbolic consumption has become one of the most influential perspectives in consumer research, emphasizing that marketplace offerings operate as cultural resources that enable consumers to define who they are, who they aspire to become, and how they wish to be perceived by others (Solomon, 1983; Schouten, 1991; Holt, 1998; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Products, brands, and consumption experiences therefore function as symbolic carriers whose value frequently extends beyond their material utility.

The symbolic nature of consumption is deeply rooted in social interaction processes. Symbolic interactionist perspectives suggest that marketplace objects operate as social stimuli capable of conveying culturally shared meanings and interpersonal signals (Solomon, 1983). Through consumption practices, individuals communicate identity claims, negotiate social relationships, and establish positions within broader cultural systems. Research has consistently demonstrated that consumption choices often serve as mechanisms of identity reconstruction, particularly during periods of personal transition and self-development (Schouten, 1991). Consumers actively appropriate marketplace meanings to support identity projects, reinforce desired self-concepts, and pursue social legitimacy within relevant communities.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) further expanded this perspective by positioning consumption as a cultural process embedded within broader systems of meaning, ideology, and social structure (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). From this viewpoint, consumption operates not merely as an economic activity but as a mechanism through which individuals engage with cultural narratives, marketplace ideologies, and collective identity formations. Products and brands become symbolic resources that consumers employ to construct meaningful life projects, communicate social distinctions, and navigate tensions between individuality and social conformity (Holt, 2002; Thompson, 2004). Symbolic consumption thus represents an important intersection between marketplace participation and identity formation.

The significance of symbolic consumption has become particularly evident in contemporary digital society. The rapid diffusion of social media platforms, mobile technologies, digital marketplaces, and networked communities has fundamentally transformed the processes through which symbolic meanings are created, circulated, interpreted, and validated. While symbolic consumption has long existed within physical marketplaces, digital environments have dramatically expanded the visibility, reach, and speed of symbolic interactions among consumers (Belk, 2013; Belk, 2014). Consumption-related identity expressions are no longer confined to localized social settings but increasingly occur before potentially unlimited audiences connected through platform-mediated networks.

Digital technologies have altered the traditional relationship between consumers, products, and audiences. Social media platforms enable consumers to publicly display consumption choices through photographs, videos, reviews, recommendations, and lifestyle narratives. As a result, consumption increasingly operates as an ongoing performance of identity rather than a private act of acquisition or usage. Digital profiles, social media activities, online affiliations, and virtual possessions have become integral components of the contemporary extended self, expanding the symbolic resources available for identity construction and self-presentation (Belk, 2013; Belk, 2014). Consumers increasingly consume not only products

but also visibility, recognition, engagement, and symbolic relevance within digital environments.

Recent developments in digital consumer culture suggest that symbolic consumption is increasingly shaped by platform-mediated interactions. Digital platforms function not merely as communication channels but also as socio-technical infrastructures that influence how symbolic meanings circulate and gain legitimacy. Visibility within contemporary digital environments is often governed by algorithmic systems that selectively amplify particular forms of content, identity performances, and symbolic signals (Bucher, 2018; Cotter, 2019). Consequently, symbolic value is no longer determined solely by cultural meanings embedded within products but is increasingly influenced by platform architectures that shape exposure, engagement, and audience recognition.

At the same time, emerging forms of creator culture and influencer-mediated consumption have further intensified symbolic meaning production. Influencers, content creators, and digital opinion leaders increasingly function as cultural intermediaries who shape marketplace meanings, lifestyle aspirations, and identity narratives (Abidin, 2018; Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Through continuous content production and audience interaction, these actors facilitate the diffusion of symbolic meanings that consumers subsequently appropriate as resources for self-construction and social positioning. Symbolic consumption therefore operates within highly dynamic ecosystems where meanings are continuously negotiated among consumers, brands, communities, algorithms, and creators.

Despite extensive scholarly attention devoted to symbolic consumption, several important theoretical limitations remain. Much of the foundational symbolic consumption literature was developed within predominantly physical consumption environments characterized by tangible possessions, face-to-face interactions, and relatively bounded social audiences (Solomon, 1983; Schouten, 1991; Holt, 1998). While these theoretical foundations remain highly influential, they may not fully capture the complexities of symbolic consumption operating within contemporary digital ecosystems characterized by persistent visibility, networked interactions, algorithmic mediation, and platform-based recognition systems.

Furthermore, existing digital consumer research frequently emphasizes technology adoption, platform engagement, online participation, and consumer experiences while devoting comparatively less attention to the symbolic mechanisms through which consumers transform marketplace meanings into identity performances and social outcomes (Dey *et al.*, 2020; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Studies examining identity signaling, self-presentation, social recognition, and digital self-construction have generated important insights (Belk, 2013; Bhattacharjee *et al.*, 2014; Grewal *et al.*, 2020; Raimondo *et al.*, 2022), yet these streams remain relatively fragmented. Existing scholarship provides limited explanation regarding how symbolic meanings evolve into identity projection, digital visibility, social recognition, lifestyle alignment, and ultimately consumption intentions within a unified theoretical framework.

This limitation is particularly significant because contemporary digital society increasingly transforms consumption into a visible and socially evaluated activity. Identity expressions become meaningful not simply because consumers project them but because they are observed, interpreted, validated, and reproduced by relevant audiences. Recognition, visibility, and lifestyle congruence therefore appear to play increasingly important roles in shaping consumption outcomes. However, existing symbolic consumption frameworks provide only limited guidance regarding how these processes interact within digitally mediated consumption environments.

Responding to these theoretical challenges, this paper develops the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM), an integrated conceptual framework that synthesizes insights from Symbolic Consumption Theory, Consumer Identity Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and Digital Consumer Culture literature. The proposed framework conceptualizes symbolic

consumption as a sequential process through which symbolic meanings influence identity projection, digital visibility, social recognition, lifestyle alignment, and ultimately consumption intention. By integrating these previously fragmented perspectives, the paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of symbolic consumption within contemporary digital society and provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical investigations across diverse consumption contexts.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Symbolic Consumption Theory

Symbolic Consumption Theory emerged as a response to the limitations of utilitarian explanations of consumer behavior. Traditional economic perspectives generally assume that consumers make purchasing decisions based on functional utility, price considerations, and product performance. However, consumer researchers have long recognized that marketplace choices frequently involve meanings that extend beyond objective utility. Consumers often select products, brands, and experiences because of what they symbolize rather than merely what they do (Solomon, 1983; Belk, 1988; Holt, 1998).

The symbolic perspective is rooted in symbolic interactionism, which views marketplace objects as social stimuli capable of communicating cultural and interpersonal meanings. Solomon (1983) argued that products function as symbolic resources through which individuals express identities, negotiate social relationships, and communicate desired impressions to others. Consumption therefore becomes a communicative act embedded within broader systems of social interaction and cultural interpretation.

One of the most influential contributions to symbolic consumption research is McCracken's (1986) Meaning Transfer Model. According to this perspective, cultural meanings originate within society and are transferred to consumer goods through institutions such as advertising, fashion systems, media, and cultural intermediaries. Consumers subsequently appropriate these meanings through acquisition, possession, usage, and consumption rituals. Products thus become symbolic carriers of socially shared meanings rather than mere functional objects.

Research further demonstrates that symbolic meanings play a crucial role in identity construction and self-definition. Belk (1988) proposed the concept of the extended self, suggesting that possessions become incorporated into individuals' self-concepts because they embody personal values, aspirations, memories, and social relationships. Consumers frequently perceive marketplace objects as extensions of who they are, resulting in strong symbolic attachments that influence decision-making and consumption behavior.

The symbolic value of consumption is also closely associated with social differentiation and status communication. Holt (1998) argued that consumption practices often reflect broader cultural structures and social hierarchies. Consumers use products, brands, and experiences as markers of distinction that communicate social competence, cultural capital, and group affiliation. Marketplace choices therefore function not only as expressions of personal preference but also as mechanisms through which individuals position themselves within social systems.

Subsequent research has expanded symbolic consumption theory by demonstrating that consumers continuously navigate tensions between belonging and distinctiveness. White and Argo (2012) found that consumers strategically adjust their consumption choices to balance desires for social acceptance and personal uniqueness. Similarly, White *et al.* (2012) showed that identity threats can trigger both associative and dissociative consumption behaviors, highlighting the dynamic relationship between symbolic meanings and social identity management.

Beyond status communication, symbolic consumption increasingly serves broader recognition-seeking functions. Luedicke *et al.* (2010) argued that consumers actively employ symbolic resources to negotiate social legitimacy and construct meaningful identity narratives. Crockett (2017) similarly demonstrated that symbolic consumption contributes to respectability projects through which individuals seek validation and recognition from relevant audiences. These findings suggest that symbolic meanings become behaviorally influential when they facilitate desired social outcomes rather than merely conveying information about products.

Recent developments within consumer culture research further indicate that symbolic meanings are not static attributes embedded within products. Instead, symbolic value emerges through ongoing interactions among consumers, brands, communities, and marketplace institutions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Akaka *et al.*, 2022). Consumers actively participate in meaning creation processes by interpreting, modifying, sharing, and reproducing marketplace symbols within various social contexts. Symbolic consumption therefore represents a dynamic process of meaning negotiation rather than a one-directional transfer of cultural significance.

Despite its substantial theoretical contributions, classical symbolic consumption theory was largely developed within physical marketplace environments characterized by tangible possessions and face-to-face interactions. Contemporary digital environments introduce new conditions in which symbolic meanings are increasingly circulated through social media platforms, online communities, creator ecosystems, and algorithmically mediated interactions. These developments suggest the need to reconsider how symbolic meanings evolve into identity expressions, visibility, recognition, and consumption outcomes within digital consumer society.

2.2 Consumer Identity Theory

Consumer Identity Theory provides an important explanation for why symbolic meanings matter in consumption processes. Identity is increasingly viewed as an ongoing social project rather than a fixed psychological attribute. Individuals continuously construct, negotiate, and revise their identities through interactions with cultural resources, social institutions, and marketplace offerings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 2013).

The relationship between consumption and identity has received extensive scholarly attention. Belk's (1988) extended self theory argues that possessions become meaningful because consumers incorporate them into their self-definitions. Marketplace resources often function as symbolic extensions of the self, enabling individuals to express values, aspirations, competencies, and social affiliations. Consequently, products acquire significance not solely because of their attributes but because they contribute to identity construction and maintenance.

The rise of digital technologies has significantly expanded the scope of identity-related consumption. Belk (2013, 2014) argues that digital possessions, online profiles, social media activities, virtual communities, and digitally mediated interactions increasingly form part of the contemporary extended self. Consumers now construct identities not only through physical possessions but also through digital artifacts that serve symbolic and communicative functions.

Identity construction frequently occurs through identity signaling processes. Bhattacharjee *et al.* (2014) demonstrate that consumers actively use brands and products to communicate desired self-concepts. Marketplace offerings become symbolic tools that enable individuals to project identities to relevant audiences. Similarly, Reed *et al.* (2012) argue that identity-based motivations exert significant influence on consumer decision-making because individuals tend to prefer products that reinforce salient aspects of the self.

Recent research increasingly emphasizes the performative nature of digital identity construction. Consumers continuously engage in identity work by curating symbolic representations of themselves across multiple digital platforms (Marwick, 2015; Duffy & Chan, 2019). Social media environments encourage individuals to strategically manage impressions by selecting, displaying, and narrating consumption experiences that support desired self-presentations. Identity therefore becomes a visible and interactive process shaped by audience responses and platform affordances.

Digital self-presentation also involves balancing authenticity and aspirational positioning. Consumers seek to communicate identities that appear both credible and socially desirable. Abidin (2021) argues that contemporary digital culture encourages individuals to engage in ongoing visibility labor through which symbolic identities are continuously produced, maintained, and evaluated. Identity projection thus extends beyond simple self-expression and becomes an active process of negotiating recognition and legitimacy within networked audiences.

Consumer identity research further highlights the importance of social categories and collective identities. Consumption choices often reflect broader affiliations related to gender, class, ethnicity, lifestyle communities, and cultural groups (Thompson & Üstüner, 2015; Vikas *et al.*, 2015). Marketplace resources therefore function as symbolic instruments that facilitate both individual differentiation and collective belonging.

Collectively, Consumer Identity Theory suggests that symbolic meanings influence behavior because they support identity-related goals. Products and brands become valuable not only because of what they provide functionally but because they enable consumers to communicate, affirm, and negotiate identities within social environments. This perspective provides a critical theoretical bridge connecting symbolic meanings to observable identity expressions.

2.3 Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) provides a broader socio-cultural framework for understanding how symbolic meanings emerge, circulate, and acquire significance within marketplace systems. Arnould and Thompson (2005) conceptualized CCT as a family of theoretical perspectives examining the dynamic relationships among consumer actions, cultural meanings, marketplace institutions, and social structures.

One of the central assumptions of CCT is that consumption operates as a cultural process rather than merely an economic activity. Consumers actively interpret, appropriate, and transform marketplace meanings in ways that support personal and collective identity projects. Marketplace offerings therefore function as cultural resources that individuals employ to construct meaningful lives and negotiate social realities.

Consumer identity projects constitute one of the foundational streams within CCT. Research suggests that consumers continuously engage in symbolic activities aimed at constructing coherent narratives about who they are and who they aspire to become (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2017). Consumption thus serves as a cultural toolkit through which identities are produced, maintained, and transformed.

Marketplace cultures provide another important dimension of symbolic consumption. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) demonstrated how consumption-based communities develop distinct symbolic systems that guide member behavior and reinforce collective identities. Similar dynamics are increasingly observed within digital communities where consumers collectively negotiate meanings associated with brands, products, and lifestyles (Muñiz & Schau, 2005).

CCT also emphasizes the role of marketplace ideologies and institutional structures in shaping consumption practices. Thompson (2004) argues that dominant cultural narratives

influence how consumers interpret symbolic meanings and construct social realities. Symbolic consumption therefore reflects broader ideological systems rather than purely individual preferences.

Recent developments within CCT increasingly focus on issues of diversity, inclusion, social transformation, and collective action. Chatzidakis *et al.* (2021) highlight the importance of solidarity movements in shaping contemporary consumer cultures, while Crockett (2022) emphasizes the relationship between marketplace dynamics and broader processes of social inequality. These developments demonstrate that symbolic meanings are deeply embedded within social and political contexts.

Taken together, Consumer Culture Theory provides the macro-level perspective necessary for understanding symbolic consumption as a socially embedded process. It explains how symbolic meanings emerge from cultural systems and how consumers appropriate these meanings to construct identities and navigate social relationships.

2.4 Digital Consumer Culture and Platform Society

The rapid diffusion of digital technologies has transformed contemporary consumer culture in fundamental ways. Digital consumer culture examines how social media platforms, mobile technologies, online communities, and platform ecosystems reshape consumption practices, identity construction, and meaning-making processes (Belk, 2013; Belk, 2014).

Digitalization has increased connectivity, participation, and visibility within marketplace environments. Consumers increasingly operate within digitally mediated ecosystems where symbolic meanings are continuously produced, shared, and modified through interactions among users, brands, creators, and communities (Dey *et al.*, 2020; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Consumption therefore becomes increasingly relational, participatory, and networked.

Social media platforms have amplified identity-related consumption behaviors by enabling consumers to publicly display lifestyles, preferences, values, and marketplace affiliations. Consumption activities become visible performances directed toward potentially large audiences (Grewal *et al.*, 2020; Raimondo *et al.*, 2022). Visibility consequently emerges as a critical dimension of contemporary symbolic consumption.

Recent scholarship suggests that digital platforms should be understood not merely as communication channels but as socio-technical infrastructures that actively shape social interactions and symbolic meaning circulation. Platform society scholars argue that digital platforms organize social visibility through algorithmic systems that determine which forms of content receive attention, engagement, and amplification (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Poell *et al.*, 2022). Symbolic consumption therefore increasingly unfolds within environments governed by platform logics.

The growing influence of creator economies further intensifies symbolic meaning production. Influencers, content creators, and digital opinion leaders function as cultural intermediaries who shape lifestyle aspirations, consumption norms, and identity narratives (Abidin, 2018; Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Through continuous interaction with audiences, these actors facilitate the diffusion of symbolic meanings that consumers subsequently appropriate as resources for identity construction and social positioning.

Digital consumer culture is also characterized by new forms of recognition and validation. Social media platforms institutionalize recognition through visible metrics such as likes, comments, shares, engagement rates, and follower counts. These metrics provide consumers with immediate feedback regarding the effectiveness of identity performances and symbolic communication efforts (Marwick, 2015; Cotter, 2019). Recognition therefore becomes a measurable and highly visible component of symbolic consumption processes.

Another important transformation concerns the increasing role of algorithmic mediation. Recommendation systems, personalization algorithms, and artificial intelligence technologies influence which symbolic cues consumers encounter and how marketplace meanings are distributed across digital networks (Kozyreva *et al.*, 2020; Davenport *et al.*, 2020). Symbolic consumption consequently evolves within environments where both human actors and technological systems participate in shaping identity-related experiences.

Collectively, digital consumer culture and platform society literature suggest that symbolic consumption extends beyond product ownership and functional utility. Contemporary consumption increasingly operates as a process involving symbolic meaning creation, identity projection, digital visibility, social recognition, and lifestyle performance. These developments provide the theoretical foundation for developing a more integrated explanation of symbolic consumption within contemporary digital society.

3. Toward a Digital Symbolic Consumption Model

3.1 Why Existing Symbolic Consumption Models Are No Longer Sufficient

The theoretical foundations of symbolic consumption have significantly advanced scholarly understanding of how consumers utilize marketplace resources to construct identities, communicate social meanings, and negotiate cultural positions (Solomon, 1983; Belk, 1988; Holt, 1998; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Classical symbolic consumption research successfully demonstrated that products and brands function as symbolic resources whose value often extends beyond functional utility. These perspectives established consumption as a meaningful social and cultural activity rather than a purely economic process.

Despite these important contributions, existing symbolic consumption frameworks were largely developed within marketplace environments characterized by physical ownership, tangible possessions, and relatively bounded social interactions. Symbolic meanings were primarily understood as resources embedded within products and appropriated by consumers through acquisition, possession, and usage (McCracken, 1986; Richins, 1994). Such assumptions reflected marketplace conditions in which symbolic communication typically occurred within localized social settings and face-to-face interactions.

Contemporary digital society has fundamentally altered these conditions. Consumption increasingly unfolds within platform-mediated environments where symbolic meanings circulate continuously through social media, creator ecosystems, online communities, and algorithmically governed networks (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021; Poell *et al.*, 2022). Under these circumstances, symbolic meanings are no longer communicated solely through ownership or consumption itself. Instead, meanings acquire significance through visibility, interaction, audience engagement, and social validation.

This transformation introduces several theoretical challenges for existing symbolic consumption models. First, traditional frameworks pay limited attention to the role of visibility in shaping symbolic value. Digital platforms enable consumers to display consumption choices before potentially unlimited audiences, transforming symbolic consumption into an observable and continuously performed activity (Belk, 2013; Marwick, 2015). Visibility therefore emerges as an important mechanism that influences whether symbolic meanings achieve social relevance.

Second, existing symbolic consumption literature often assumes that symbolic meanings directly influence consumer behavior. However, contemporary digital environments suggest that symbolic meanings may operate indirectly through identity-related and social processes. Consumers frequently employ marketplace resources to construct identity performances that subsequently become subject to audience evaluation and recognition (Bhattacharjee *et al.*,

2014; Grewal *et al.*, 2020). The effectiveness of symbolic communication increasingly depends upon how identities are projected and interpreted by others.

Third, digital platforms institutionalize recognition through measurable engagement indicators such as likes, comments, shares, endorsements, and follower counts. These forms of recognition provide consumers with immediate feedback regarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of identity performances (Cotter, 2019; Abidin, 2021). Recognition thus functions as an important social mechanism that influences whether symbolic meanings become integrated into consumers' broader identity projects and consumption decisions.

Fourth, symbolic consumption increasingly occurs within environments shaped by algorithmic systems that selectively amplify particular forms of content and identity performances (Bucher, 2018; Kozyreva *et al.*, 2020). Platform architectures influence which symbolic signals receive visibility and social engagement, suggesting that symbolic value is no longer determined solely by consumers and audiences but also by technological infrastructures.

Collectively, these developments indicate that existing symbolic consumption frameworks provide only a partial explanation of contemporary consumption processes. A more comprehensive theoretical perspective is required to explain how symbolic meanings evolve into identity projection, visibility, recognition, lifestyle integration, and ultimately consumption intentions within digitally mediated environments.

3.2 Reconceptualizing Symbolic Consumption in Digital Society

Responding to these developments requires a reconceptualization of symbolic consumption that moves beyond product-centered explanations and embraces the increasingly social, visible, and networked nature of contemporary consumer behavior. Rather than viewing symbolic consumption as a process primarily concerned with acquiring meaningful products, this paper proposes that symbolic consumption should be understood as a sequential mechanism through which symbolic meanings become translated into socially recognized identities and future consumption outcomes.

The framework below establishes the intellectual architecture underpinning the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM). Rather than presenting causal relationships among constructs, it clarifies how four complementary theoretical traditions contribute distinct explanatory components to the proposed framework. This integration demonstrates the progression from symbolic meaning formation to identity processes, cultural embedding, and digitally mediated visibility dynamics that collectively justify the DSCM.

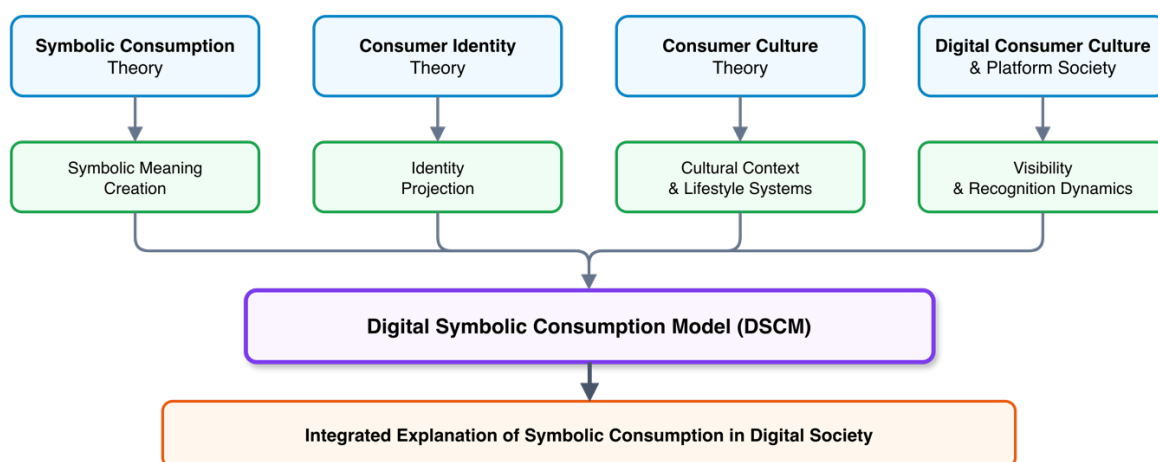


Figure 1. Theoretical Foundations of the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model

Source: Author's conceptualization based on Symbolic Consumption Theory, Consumer Identity Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and Digital Consumer Culture literature

The architecture articulated in Figure 1 clarifies the intellectual foundations of the DSCM by tracing how four complementary theoretical traditions contribute distinct explanatory domains. Symbolic Consumption Theory provides the basis for symbolic meaning creation, Consumer Identity Theory explains identity projection, Consumer Culture Theory supplies the broader cultural and lifestyle context, and Digital Consumer Culture introduces visibility and recognition dynamics. Their integration culminates in the DSCM, which offers a unified explanation of how symbolic consumption operates within contemporary platform-mediated environments and thereby establishes the conceptual foundation for the model developed in subsequent sections.

The proposed reconceptualization begins with the assumption that symbolic meanings remain the fundamental source of value within symbolic consumption. Consumers continue to seek products, brands, services, and experiences that embody desired cultural meanings, social positions, and identity-related aspirations (McCracken, 1986; Holt, 1998). However, symbolic meanings alone do not necessarily influence behavior. Their behavioral significance emerges when consumers actively employ them as resources for identity-related purposes.

Identity projection therefore becomes the first critical mechanism within the process. Consumers selectively appropriate symbolic meanings and integrate them into identity performances designed to communicate desired self-concepts. Marketplace resources become symbolic tools through which individuals express values, lifestyles, aspirations, competencies, and social affiliations (Belk, 2013; Reed *et al.*, 2012). Identity projection transforms symbolic meanings into communicative signals that can be observed and interpreted by others.

Within digital environments, identity projection increasingly occurs through publicly visible performances. Social media content, online profiles, reviews, recommendations, photographs, videos, and participation in digital communities enable consumers to communicate symbolic identities to broad audiences (Marwick, 2015; Duffy & Chan, 2019). Visibility consequently emerges as a critical stage because symbolic identities acquire social significance only when they become observable.

Visibility subsequently creates opportunities for social recognition. Audience members evaluate, interpret, endorse, challenge, or validate identity signals communicated through symbolic consumption activities. Recognition may take various forms, including social approval, status validation, community acceptance, symbolic legitimacy, and identity confirmation (Han *et al.*, 2010; Bellezza *et al.*, 2014). Digital platforms intensify these processes by making recognition highly visible and measurable through engagement metrics.

The accumulation of social recognition contributes to perceptions of lifestyle congruence. Consumers increasingly interpret recognized consumption practices as evidence that particular products, brands, and experiences align with desired identities and broader life narratives. Recognition therefore strengthens confidence in symbolic choices and reinforces commitment to lifestyle orientations that support identity coherence (Escalas, 2004; Batra *et al.*, 2012).

Ultimately, lifestyle alignment influences future consumption intentions. Consumers become more willing to purchase, support, recommend, and engage with marketplace offerings that consistently reinforce desired identities and lifestyles. Consumption intentions thus emerge not solely from functional evaluations but from a broader process involving symbolic meaning creation, identity projection, social validation, and lifestyle integration.

This reconceptualization shifts symbolic consumption theory away from static notions of symbolic value and toward a dynamic process of meaning circulation, identity performance, visibility generation, recognition acquisition, and behavioral reinforcement. Such a

perspective is better suited to explaining consumption behavior within contemporary digital consumer society.

3.3 Core Constructs of the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model

Building upon the preceding theoretical synthesis, six interrelated constructs are proposed as the foundation of the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM): Symbolic Meaning, Identity Projection, Digital Visibility, Social Recognition, Lifestyle Alignment, and Consumption Intention.

The table below consolidates the six core constructs of the DSCM into a single analytical framework. Bringing the constructs together in one location improves conceptual clarity by distinguishing their definitions, theoretical origins, and specific roles within the model. This facilitates a clearer understanding of how each construct contributes to the sequential logic of digital symbolic consumption.

Table 1. Core Constructs of the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM)

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Primary Theoretical Origin	Role in DSCM
Symbolic Meaning	The perceived cultural, social, emotional, and identity-related significance associated with products, brands, services, or consumption experiences.	Symbolic Consumption Theory (Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986; Holt, 1998)	Foundational source of symbolic value that initiates the symbolic consumption process.
Identity Projection	The intentional use of symbolic meanings to communicate desired self-concepts, values, aspirations, and social affiliations.	Consumer Identity Theory (Belk, 1988; Reed et al., 2012; Bhattacharjee et al., 2014)	Transforms symbolic meanings into communicative identity signals.
Digital Visibility	The extent to which identity-related consumption expressions become observable within digital platforms and networked environments.	Digital Consumer Culture (Belk, 2014; Dey et al., 2020)	Enables identity performances to enter social evaluation processes.
Social Recognition	The acknowledgment, validation, approval, or acceptance received from relevant audiences in response to visible identity performances.	Identity Signaling and Status Literature (Han et al., 2010; Bellezza et al., 2014)	Confers legitimacy and social value upon projected identities.
Lifestyle Alignment	The perceived congruence between symbolic consumption practices and consumers' desired lifestyles, values, and identity narratives.	Consumer Culture Theory and Self-Congruity Research (Escalas, 2004; Batra et al., 2012)	Internalizes recognized symbolic meanings into broader lifestyle systems.
Consumption Intention	The willingness to purchase, support, recommend, or continue engaging with marketplace offerings.	Consumer–Brand Relationship Literature (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012)	Represents the ultimate behavioral outcome of the symbolic consumption process.

Source: Author's synthesis based on the reviewed literature

By consolidating the six constructs into a unified analytical structure, Table 1 clarifies the conceptual boundaries of the DSCM and reduces ambiguity regarding construct meaning and level of analysis. The table demonstrates that the framework combines theoretical insights from symbolic consumption, identity, culture, and digital consumer research while assigning each construct a distinct role within the proposed sequential mechanism. This distinction is particularly important for future empirical studies seeking to operationalize and test the DSCM.

Symbolic Meaning refers to the perceived cultural, social, emotional, and identity-related significance associated with products, brands, services, or consumption experiences. Symbolic meanings enable consumers to interpret marketplace offerings as representations of values, aspirations, lifestyles, and social identities rather than merely functional objects (Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986; Holt, 1998).

Identity Projection refers to the intentional use of symbolic meanings to communicate desired self-concepts. Consumers actively employ marketplace resources to express who they are, who they aspire to become, and how they wish to be perceived by others (Belk, 2013; Reed *et al.*, 2012; Bhattacharjee *et al.*, 2014).

Digital Visibility represents the extent to which identity-related consumption expressions become observable within digital environments. Visibility emerges through social media activities, user-generated content, platform participation, reviews, recommendations, and other digitally mediated interactions (Belk, 2014; Dey *et al.*, 2020).

Social Recognition refers to the acknowledgment, validation, approval, or acceptance received from relevant audiences in response to visible identity performances. Recognition reflects the degree to which projected symbolic identities are perceived as legitimate, desirable, and socially meaningful (Han *et al.*, 2010; Bellezza *et al.*, 2014).

Lifestyle Alignment represents the perceived congruence between symbolic consumption practices and consumers' desired lifestyles, values, and identity narratives. Alignment occurs when consumers perceive that marketplace choices support broader self-definitional goals and life orientations (Escalas, 2004; Batra *et al.*, 2012).

Consumption Intention refers to consumers' willingness to purchase, support, recommend, or continue engaging with marketplace offerings. Within the proposed framework, consumption intention represents the ultimate behavioral outcome generated through preceding symbolic and social processes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012).

Together, these six constructs form a sequential process through which symbolic meanings evolve into consumption intentions within contemporary digital society. The resulting framework extends existing symbolic consumption literature by integrating identity dynamics, digital visibility mechanisms, social recognition processes, and lifestyle considerations into a unified conceptual model capable of explaining symbolic consumption in platform-mediated environments.

4. Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM)

4.1 The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Drawing upon the integration of Symbolic Consumption Theory, Consumer Identity Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and Digital Consumer Culture literature, this paper proposes the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM) as a comprehensive framework for explaining symbolic consumption processes within contemporary digital society.

The model conceptualizes symbolic consumption as a sequential process through which symbolic meanings influence consumption intentions through a series of interconnected

identity-related and social mechanisms. Unlike traditional symbolic consumption frameworks that primarily focus on symbolic value embedded within products, the DSCM emphasizes the dynamic transformation of symbolic meanings into identity performances, social recognition, and behavioral outcomes.

The conceptual model below formalizes the core argument of the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM). It specifies the sequential pathway through which symbolic meanings become behaviorally consequential in digital environments by passing through identity-related and socially mediated mechanisms. The framework highlights visibility and recognition as critical intermediary processes linking symbolic resources to future consumption intentions.

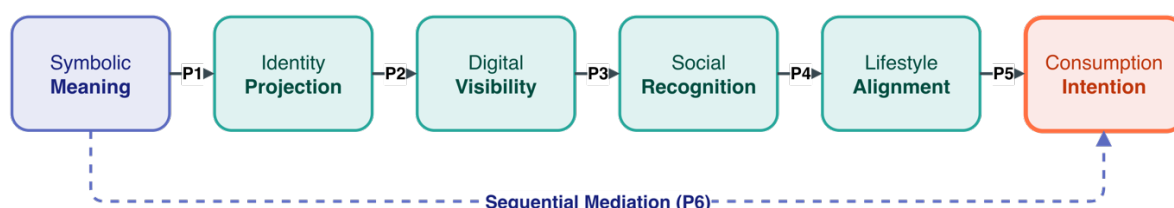


Figure 2. Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM)
Source: Author's conceptualization

The framework articulated in Figure 2 specifies the causal architecture of the DSCM. The model proposes that symbolic meanings influence consumer behavior indirectly through a sequential chain of identity-related and socially mediated mechanisms. Symbolic Meaning stimulates Identity Projection, which enhances Digital Visibility, increases opportunities for Social Recognition, reinforces Lifestyle Alignment, and ultimately strengthens Consumption Intention. The framework assumes that symbolic meanings constitute the primary source of consumption value. These meanings motivate consumers to engage in identity projection activities designed to communicate desired self-concepts. Identity expressions subsequently become visible within digital environments, creating opportunities for audience recognition. Recognition reinforces perceptions of lifestyle congruence, ultimately increasing future consumption intentions.

The model therefore positions symbolic consumption as a socially embedded process through which consumers continuously negotiate identity, visibility, recognition, and lifestyle coherence within digitally mediated environments.

4.2 Relationship Between Symbolic Meaning and Identity Projection

Symbolic meanings represent the cultural and social significance associated with marketplace offerings. These meanings provide consumers with symbolic resources that can be appropriated and integrated into identity construction processes (McCracken, 1986; Holt, 1998).

Consumer Identity Theory suggests that individuals actively seek marketplace resources capable of reinforcing desired self-concepts and supporting identity projects (Belk, 1988; Reed *et al.*, 2012). Products and brands become valuable because they communicate values, aspirations, lifestyles, competencies, and social affiliations. Consequently, symbolic meanings serve as important inputs for identity projection activities.

Research consistently demonstrates that consumers employ symbolic resources to communicate both actual and aspirational identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Bhattacharjee *et al.*, 2014). Symbolic meanings therefore increase the likelihood that consumers will use marketplace offerings as tools for self-expression and identity communication.

Proposition 1 (P1): *Symbolic Meaning positively influences Identity Projection.*

4.3 Relationship Between Identity Projection and Digital Visibility

Identity projection becomes socially relevant when identity expressions are communicated within observable environments. Digital platforms provide consumers with unprecedented opportunities to display symbolic identities through social media posts, photographs, videos, reviews, recommendations, and participation in online communities (Belk, 2013; Belk, 2014).

The growing importance of digital self-presentation suggests that consumers increasingly transform symbolic meanings into publicly visible identity performances (Marwick, 2015; Duffy & Chan, 2019). Identity-related consumption activities become visible signals that allow consumers to communicate desired impressions to diverse audiences.

Research on digital identity work indicates that individuals who engage more actively in identity projection are also more likely to generate visible consumption-related content (Abidin, 2021; Raimondo *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, identity projection functions as a key driver of digital visibility.

Proposition 2 (P2): *Identity Projection positively influences Digital Visibility.*

4.4 Relationship Between Digital Visibility and Social Recognition

Visibility creates opportunities for symbolic identities to be observed, interpreted, and evaluated by relevant audiences. Without visibility, symbolic meanings and identity projections remain largely private and therefore have limited social impact.

Social recognition emerges when visible identity performances receive validation, acknowledgment, approval, or acceptance from others. Status signaling research suggests that audience responses are critical determinants of symbolic communication effectiveness (Han *et al.*, 2010; Bellezza *et al.*, 2014). Identity claims become meaningful only when they are recognized by relevant social groups.

Digital environments intensify recognition processes by institutionalizing audience feedback through measurable engagement mechanisms such as likes, comments, shares, endorsements, and follower interactions (Cotter, 2019; Abidin, 2021). Increased visibility therefore enhances opportunities for recognition and social validation.

Proposition 3 (P3): *Digital Visibility positively influences Social Recognition.*

4.5 Relationship Between Social Recognition and Lifestyle Alignment

Social recognition provides consumers with feedback regarding the legitimacy and desirability of symbolic identities. Recognition reinforces perceptions that particular consumption choices accurately reflect desired self-concepts and social positions.

Identity theories suggest that individuals seek consistency between social feedback and self-definitions (Belk, 1988; Reed *et al.*, 2012). Positive recognition strengthens confidence in identity-related consumption practices and encourages greater integration of symbolic meanings into broader lifestyle narratives.

Lifestyle research similarly demonstrates that social validation contributes to stronger perceptions of lifestyle congruence and personal authenticity (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Escalas, 2004). Consumers become increasingly committed to symbolic consumption patterns that receive positive social reinforcement.

Proposition 4 (P4): *Social Recognition positively influences Lifestyle Alignment.*

4.6 Relationship Between Lifestyle Alignment and Consumption Intention

Lifestyle Alignment reflects the degree to which symbolic consumption supports desired identities, values, and life narratives. When consumers perceive strong congruence between

marketplace offerings and preferred lifestyles, they are more likely to maintain long-term relationships with those offerings.

Research on consumer-brand relationships consistently demonstrates that congruence between symbolic meanings and personal lifestyles contributes to stronger attachment, commitment, loyalty, and behavioral intentions (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra *et al.*, 2012). Marketplace offerings that support lifestyle coherence acquire greater personal relevance and emotional significance.

Lifestyle Alignment therefore functions as an important mechanism translating symbolic and social experiences into future behavioral intentions. Consumers become more willing to purchase, recommend, support, and engage with offerings that reinforce desired life orientations.

Proposition 5 (P5): *Lifestyle Alignment positively influences Consumption Intention.*

4.7 The Sequential Logic of Digital Symbolic Consumption

While each relationship can be examined independently, the central contribution of DSCM lies in its sequential explanation of symbolic consumption processes. The model suggests that consumption intentions do not emerge directly from symbolic meanings. Instead, symbolic meanings influence behavior through a series of interconnected mechanisms involving identity construction, visibility generation, social recognition, and lifestyle integration.

The process logic below clarifies how symbolic meaning becomes behaviorally relevant through a sequence of transformation mechanisms. It shifts attention from isolated constructs to the cumulative movement from meaning creation, identity performance, visibility, recognition, lifestyle internalization, and eventual behavioral intention.

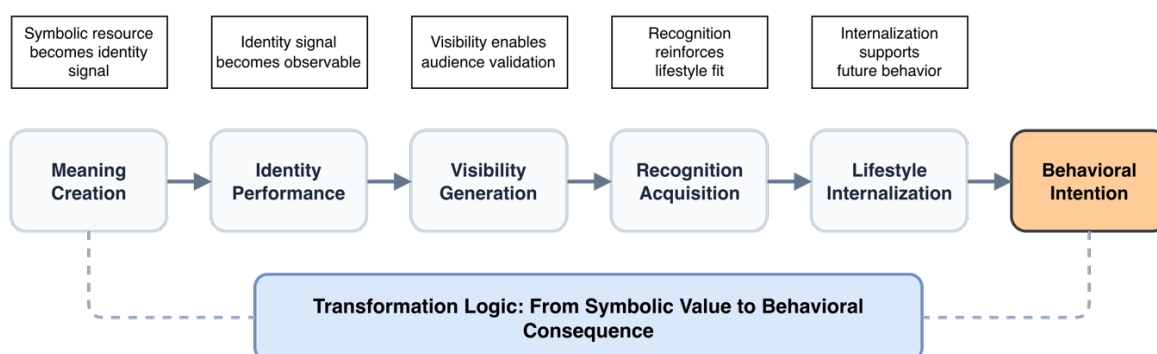


Figure 3. Sequential Transformation Logic of Digital Symbolic Consumption

Source: Author's conceptualization

As clarified in Figure 3, the theoretical contribution of DSCM lies not only in linking six constructs but in specifying how symbolic value is transformed across successive analytical stages. Figure 3 shows that symbolic resources first become identity signals, then become observable through digital visibility, gain social force through recognition, become internalized as lifestyle fit, and finally support behavioral intention. This process-oriented view strengthens the article's argument by explaining why symbolic meanings in digital environments require visibility and recognition before they become consequential for consumption behavior.

This sequential logic extends traditional symbolic consumption perspectives by introducing visibility and recognition as critical intermediary mechanisms within digitally mediated environments. Symbolic value alone may be insufficient to generate behavioral outcomes unless consumers successfully project symbolic identities, achieve visibility, obtain recognition, and integrate these experiences into broader lifestyle narratives.

The proposed framework therefore conceptualizes symbolic consumption as a cumulative process in which symbolic meanings acquire behavioral influence through social and relational mechanisms. Such a perspective reflects the realities of contemporary platform society, where consumption increasingly operates as a visible, interactive, and socially evaluated activity.

Proposition 6 (P6): *The relationship between Symbolic Meaning and Consumption Intention is sequentially mediated by Identity Projection, Digital Visibility, Social Recognition, and Lifestyle Alignment.*

4.8 Theoretical Positioning of DSCM

The DSCM contributes to existing consumer research by integrating previously fragmented theoretical streams into a unified framework. Symbolic Consumption Theory explains the origins of symbolic value, Consumer Identity Theory explains identity-related mechanisms, Consumer Culture Theory explains broader cultural contexts, and Digital Consumer Culture literature explains the role of visibility and platform-mediated interactions.

The table below positions the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM) within the broader consumer research landscape. Its purpose is not to summarize prior theories, but to demonstrate precisely how the DSCM extends, integrates, and moves beyond existing explanations of symbolic consumption in digital environments. This comparison makes the article's theoretical contribution more explicit and reviewer-visible.

Table 2. Theoretical Positioning of the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM)

Theoretical Perspective	Primary Analytical Focus	Key Limitation in Contemporary Digital Contexts	Extension Offered by DSCM
Symbolic Consumption Theory	Symbolic meanings embedded in products, brands, and consumption experiences.	Emphasizes symbolic value but provides limited explanation of how symbolic meanings become behavioral outcomes in platform-mediated environments.	Introduces a sequential mechanism explaining how symbolic meanings are translated into consumption intentions through identity and social processes.
Consumer Identity Theory	Identity construction, self-expression, and identity-based consumption behavior.	Focuses primarily on identity formation and signaling, with less attention to visibility and audience-mediated validation processes.	Incorporates Digital Visibility and Social Recognition as mechanisms through which identity projections gain social relevance and influence behavior.
Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)	Cultural systems, marketplace meanings, identity projects, and lifestyle formation.	Provides macro-level cultural explanations but offers limited specification of intermediary mechanisms linking culture to behavioral outcomes.	Connects cultural meanings to behavioral intentions through identifiable micro-level and meso-level processes.
Digital Consumer Culture Literature	Social media participation, platform interactions, digital self-presentation, and networked consumption.	Often emphasizes platform engagement and digital practices without integrating symbolic consumption mechanisms into a unified framework.	Integrates digital visibility and platform-mediated recognition into a broader symbolic consumption process model.

Theoretical Perspective	Primary Analytical Focus	Key Limitation in Contemporary Digital Contexts	Extension Offered by DSCM
Platform Society Perspective	Algorithmic governance, visibility structures, and socio-technical infrastructures.	Explains how platforms organize attention but provides limited insight into how symbolic meanings shape consumer intentions.	Positions platform-mediated visibility and recognition as key stages within symbolic consumption dynamics.
Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM)	Sequential transformation of symbolic meaning into consumption intention through identity projection, visibility, recognition, and lifestyle alignment.	—	Provides an integrated process model linking symbolic value, identity performance, social validation, and behavioral outcomes within digital society.

Source: Author's synthesis based on Symbolic Consumption Theory, Consumer Identity Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, Digital Consumer Culture, and Platform Society literature

By systematically comparing the DSCM with its theoretical antecedents, Table 2 clarifies the model's intellectual positioning and demonstrates that its contribution is not the replacement of existing theories but their integration into a unified explanatory framework. The comparison highlights two distinctive advances: the introduction of Digital Visibility and Social Recognition as intermediary mechanisms and the reconceptualization of symbolic consumption as a sequential process linking symbolic value to behavioral intention. These distinctions strengthen the article's theoretical originality and help establish the DSCM as a contemporary extension of symbolic consumption scholarship.

By integrating these perspectives, DSCM advances a more comprehensive explanation of symbolic consumption within digital society. The model shifts theoretical attention from symbolic meanings as static product attributes toward symbolic consumption as a dynamic process involving meaning creation, identity performance, social recognition, and behavioral reinforcement. This perspective provides a foundation for future empirical investigations examining how symbolic consumption operates within increasingly visible and interconnected digital environments.

5. Implications for Theory Development and Future Research

5.1 Advancing Symbolic Consumption Theory in Digital Society

The Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM) offers an important extension to symbolic consumption scholarship by repositioning symbolic consumption as a dynamic and socially embedded process rather than a static outcome of product meaning attribution. Traditional symbolic consumption literature has primarily focused on how consumers derive symbolic value from products, brands, and experiences (Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986; Holt, 1998). While these perspectives have generated substantial theoretical insights, they often conceptualize symbolic meanings as relatively stable resources that consumers appropriate for identity-related purposes.

The present framework argues that symbolic meanings alone are insufficient to explain consumption outcomes within contemporary digital society. Symbolic value increasingly emerges through ongoing interactions involving identity performances, visibility mechanisms, audience evaluations, and social validation processes. By explicitly incorporating Identity Projection, Digital Visibility, Social Recognition, and Lifestyle Alignment, the DSCM extends

symbolic consumption theory beyond traditional product-centered explanations and toward a more process-oriented understanding of symbolic consumption.

This reconceptualization is particularly important because contemporary consumption increasingly occurs within digitally mediated environments where symbolic meanings are continuously created, shared, modified, and legitimized through networked interactions. The DSCM therefore contributes to the modernization of symbolic consumption theory by aligning it with the realities of platform-mediated consumer behavior.

5.2 Extending Consumer Identity Theory

The proposed framework also contributes to Consumer Identity Theory by clarifying the mechanisms through which symbolic meanings become integrated into observable identity performances. Existing identity research has consistently demonstrated that consumers utilize marketplace resources to construct and maintain self-concepts (Belk, 1988; Reed *et al.*, 2012). However, relatively limited attention has been devoted to explaining how symbolic resources are transformed into publicly visible identity signals and subsequently evaluated by others.

The DSCM positions Identity Projection as a central mediating mechanism connecting symbolic meanings and social outcomes. This perspective highlights that identities are not merely internal psychological structures but also socially communicated performances that require audience interpretation and validation. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary research emphasizing the performative and relational nature of identity construction in digital environments (Marwick, 2015; Duffy & Chan, 2019; Abidin, 2021).

Furthermore, the framework recognizes that identity construction increasingly occurs within environments characterized by persistent visibility. Consumers no longer construct identities exclusively through ownership and personal consumption experiences but also through publicly observable interactions that invite continuous evaluation from networked audiences. Consequently, identity-related consumption becomes inseparable from visibility and recognition processes.

5.3 Integrating Consumer Culture Theory and Platform Society

A further contribution of the DSCM lies in its integration of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) with emerging scholarship on platform society and digital consumer culture. CCT has long emphasized the role of marketplace meanings, identity projects, and cultural systems in shaping consumption behavior (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, much of the foundational literature was developed before the widespread emergence of social media platforms, creator economies, and algorithmically mediated marketplaces.

The DSCM extends CCT by recognizing that symbolic meanings now circulate through socio-technical infrastructures that actively influence visibility, engagement, and recognition. Platform architectures increasingly shape which symbolic signals receive amplification, which identity performances gain legitimacy, and which consumption narratives become culturally influential (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Poell *et al.*, 2022).

This perspective contributes to an emerging body of scholarship examining the relationship between consumer culture and platform governance. Rather than viewing symbolic meanings solely as cultural phenomena, the DSCM suggests that symbolic value is increasingly co-produced through interactions among consumers, communities, creators, algorithms, and digital platforms. Such an interpretation expands theoretical understanding of how consumer culture evolves within digitally mediated societies.

5.4 Introducing Visibility as a Strategic Consumer Resource

One of the most distinctive contributions of the proposed framework is the explicit incorporation of Digital Visibility as a theoretical construct within symbolic consumption processes. Existing symbolic consumption literature has traditionally emphasized meanings, identities, and social status, yet visibility itself has rarely been conceptualized as a central mechanism connecting symbolic value and behavioral outcomes.

The DSCM argues that visibility constitutes a strategic consumer resource within contemporary digital environments. Consumers increasingly invest substantial effort in making symbolic identities visible through social media participation, content creation, community engagement, and digital self-presentation activities. Visibility determines whether symbolic identities can be observed, interpreted, and recognized by relevant audiences.

This perspective reflects broader transformations associated with the emergence of visibility economies in digital society. Within platform environments, visibility often functions as a prerequisite for recognition, influence, legitimacy, and symbolic value creation. Consequently, understanding symbolic consumption requires examining not only what symbolic meanings consumers possess but also how those meanings become visible within social and technological systems.

5.5 Social Recognition as a Missing Mechanism

The DSCM further contributes to consumer research by identifying Social Recognition as a critical but underdeveloped mechanism within symbolic consumption theory. Previous studies have frequently examined status signaling, social comparison, and identity communication (Han *et al.*, 2010; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011; Bellezza *et al.*, 2014). However, recognition itself has often remained an implicit outcome rather than an explicit theoretical construct.

The proposed framework suggests that symbolic meanings acquire behavioral influence only when identity performances receive acknowledgment and validation from relevant audiences. Recognition therefore functions as a bridge connecting symbolic identity expression with broader lifestyle and behavioral consequences.

This argument is especially relevant within digital environments where recognition has become highly visible, measurable, and continuously reinforced through platform-based engagement mechanisms. Likes, comments, shares, follows, and endorsements provide consumers with immediate feedback regarding the social legitimacy of identity performances. By explicitly incorporating recognition into the symbolic consumption process, the DSCM offers a more comprehensive explanation of how symbolic value generates behavioral outcomes.

5.6 Emerging Research Opportunities

The DSCM also opens several promising directions for future theoretical and empirical research. First, future studies may investigate how algorithmic systems influence symbolic consumption processes. Recommendation engines, personalization technologies, and artificial intelligence increasingly shape exposure to symbolic meanings and identity-related content. Understanding how algorithmic mediation affects visibility and recognition represents an important research opportunity.

Second, future research may examine the role of creator economies in symbolic consumption. Influencers, content creators, and digital opinion leaders increasingly function as symbolic intermediaries who shape consumption meanings and identity aspirations. Investigating these dynamics may further enrich understanding of symbolic value creation within digital society.

Third, future studies may explore contextual moderators that influence the proposed relationships. Variables such as self-monitoring, need for uniqueness, materialism, cultural capital, social media intensity, digital literacy, and platform engagement may strengthen or weaken the pathways proposed within the DSCM.

Fourth, comparative investigations across cultures, generations, and digital platforms may provide valuable insights regarding the contextual conditions under which symbolic consumption processes vary. Such studies may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of symbolic consumption within increasingly globalized and interconnected consumer societies.

Finally, future research may examine emerging digital environments such as virtual worlds, metaverse ecosystems, AI-generated identities, and immersive platform experiences. These developments are likely to further transform the ways symbolic meanings are produced, communicated, recognized, and integrated into consumer behavior.

Collectively, these opportunities suggest that symbolic consumption research is entering a new phase in which visibility, recognition, platform governance, and digital identity performance become increasingly central to understanding contemporary consumer behavior.

6. Discussion

6.1 Reinterpreting Symbolic Consumption in the Digital Era

The Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM) offers a fundamentally different interpretation of symbolic consumption compared to traditional conceptualizations. Classical symbolic consumption literature has generally emphasized products and brands as carriers of symbolic meanings that consumers utilize to construct identities, communicate status, and negotiate social relationships (Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986; Holt, 1998). While these perspectives remain highly relevant, the present framework suggests that symbolic consumption in contemporary digital society extends far beyond the symbolic meanings embedded within marketplace offerings.

The findings of this conceptual development indicate that symbolic consumption should be viewed as an ongoing social process through which meanings are transformed into identity performances, publicly displayed through digital infrastructures, socially evaluated by networked audiences, and eventually integrated into broader lifestyle systems. Symbolic value therefore emerges not only from products themselves but also from the interactions, interpretations, and recognition processes that surround those products within digitally mediated environments.

This interpretation reflects the realities of platform society, where consumption increasingly occurs within environments characterized by persistent connectivity, visibility, participation, and algorithmic mediation (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Poell *et al.*, 2022). Consumers no longer simply consume symbolic meanings; they actively perform, negotiate, and reproduce those meanings before audiences whose reactions significantly influence subsequent behavior. Symbolic consumption consequently becomes a relational and performative process rather than a purely individual act of meaning appropriation.

6.2 From Possession to Visibility

One of the most significant theoretical implications emerging from the DSCM concerns the shift from possession-based symbolic consumption toward visibility-based symbolic consumption. Traditional symbolic consumption research was largely developed within marketplace contexts where ownership and possession represented primary mechanisms through which symbolic meanings were communicated (Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994).

Digital environments have substantially altered these conditions. Social media platforms enable consumers to communicate symbolic identities without necessarily relying on ownership alone. Experiences, participation, affiliations, recommendations, digital content creation, and community engagement increasingly function as symbolic resources capable of generating social meaning. Consequently, visibility becomes a critical mechanism through which symbolic value is created and maintained.

The proposed framework suggests that symbolic meanings acquire greater behavioral significance when they become publicly observable. Visibility transforms symbolic consumption from a private relationship between consumers and marketplace offerings into a social process involving multiple audiences, interactions, and evaluations. This transformation helps explain why contemporary consumers devote considerable effort to creating, curating, and sharing consumption-related content across digital platforms.

The findings therefore support emerging arguments that visibility itself has become a valuable symbolic resource within contemporary consumer culture (Marwick, 2015; Bucher, 2018). Symbolic consumption increasingly depends on consumers' ability to make symbolic identities observable and socially relevant within digitally connected environments.

6.3 Recognition as the Missing Link in Symbolic Consumption

Another important contribution of the DSCM is the identification of Social Recognition as a central mechanism linking symbolic meanings and behavioral outcomes. Although symbolic consumption research has long acknowledged the importance of status signaling and social evaluation, recognition has rarely been explicitly positioned as a core construct within symbolic consumption frameworks.

The present framework argues that symbolic meanings become behaviorally influential when they are recognized and validated by relevant audiences. Identity performances require acknowledgment before they can effectively contribute to self-definition, legitimacy, and social positioning. Recognition therefore functions as a critical bridge connecting symbolic identity expression to broader lifestyle and behavioral consequences.

This proposition is particularly relevant within digital environments where recognition has become highly visible and measurable. Platform-based engagement mechanisms such as likes, comments, shares, follows, endorsements, and engagement metrics provide consumers with immediate feedback regarding the effectiveness of symbolic identity performances (Cotter, 2019; Abidin, 2021). Such mechanisms continuously reinforce symbolic consumption behaviors and contribute to the reproduction of symbolic value within digital communities.

The DSCM therefore extends existing symbolic consumption theory by demonstrating that symbolic meanings alone may not be sufficient to generate consumption intentions. Social recognition serves as a key mechanism through which symbolic identities acquire legitimacy and become integrated into consumers' broader self-concepts and lifestyle orientations.

6.4 Lifestyle Alignment and Behavioral Reinforcement

The inclusion of Lifestyle Alignment further expands understanding of how symbolic consumption influences long-term consumer behavior. Existing symbolic consumption research has frequently focused on symbolic meanings, status communication, and identity construction while devoting comparatively less attention to how these processes become integrated into broader lifestyle systems.

The proposed framework suggests that recognition contributes to perceptions of lifestyle congruence. Consumers become increasingly committed to symbolic consumption patterns when those patterns are perceived as consistent with desired values, aspirations, and self-

narratives. Lifestyle Alignment therefore functions as a mechanism through which symbolic experiences are translated into durable behavioral tendencies.

This interpretation is consistent with broader consumer research demonstrating that consumers prefer marketplace offerings that reinforce identity coherence and personal authenticity (Escalas, 2004; Batra *et al.*, 2012). Consumption intentions emerge not merely because products satisfy functional needs but because they support broader projects of self-construction and lifestyle maintenance.

The DSCM consequently positions lifestyle congruence as a critical factor explaining why symbolic consumption often produces long-term loyalty, advocacy, and engagement behaviors. Symbolic consumption becomes sustainable when consumers perceive strong alignment between marketplace offerings and desired life orientations.

6.5 Managerial Implications

Several important managerial implications emerge from the proposed framework. First, organizations should recognize that symbolic value increasingly represents a strategic source of competitive advantage. Contemporary consumers frequently evaluate products and brands based on their ability to support identity expression, social recognition, and lifestyle aspirations rather than purely functional attributes.

Second, marketers should focus on facilitating identity projection opportunities. Personalization initiatives, user-generated content campaigns, brand communities, and interactive platform experiences can encourage consumers to incorporate marketplace offerings into their identity projects. Such strategies may strengthen symbolic attachments and increase consumer engagement.

Third, organizations should pay greater attention to visibility mechanisms. Within digital environments, symbolic meanings become more influential when consumers are able to publicly display and communicate them. Brands that support content creation, social sharing, and community participation may enhance the symbolic relevance of their offerings.

Fourth, marketers should understand the importance of recognition systems. Community acknowledgment, peer endorsement, social validation, and customer advocacy programs can strengthen recognition processes and reinforce symbolic value creation. Recognition-oriented strategies may therefore contribute to stronger consumer relationships and long-term engagement.

Finally, organizations should consider how products and brands fit within broader lifestyle ecosystems. Consumers increasingly seek marketplace offerings that support coherent identities and desired lifestyles. Understanding lifestyle aspirations may therefore provide valuable insights for positioning strategies and brand development efforts.

6.6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the DSCM is a conceptual framework and has not yet been empirically tested. The proposed relationships are theoretically derived from multiple literature streams and therefore require empirical validation across different consumption contexts and cultural settings.

Second, the model assumes a largely sequential process linking symbolic meanings to consumption intentions. While this assumption is theoretically justified, future research may identify reciprocal relationships, feedback loops, or alternative pathways that further enrich understanding of symbolic consumption dynamics.

Third, the framework focuses primarily on digital consumer society and may not fully capture symbolic consumption processes occurring within less digitally connected environments.

Comparative investigations across different technological and cultural contexts would therefore be valuable.

Future research should empirically examine the proposed relationships using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches. Structural equation modeling may be particularly useful for testing the sequential mediation mechanisms proposed by the DSCM. Netnographic and digital ethnographic studies may also provide deeper insights into how symbolic meanings are created, communicated, and recognized within online communities.

Additional studies may investigate the influence of algorithmic systems, creator economies, virtual environments, artificial intelligence, and emerging digital ecosystems on symbolic consumption processes. Such investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how symbolic value evolves within increasingly complex digital societies.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

The Digital Symbolic Consumption Model advances symbolic consumption scholarship by proposing that symbolic consumption in contemporary digital society operates as a sequential process linking symbolic meanings, identity projection, digital visibility, social recognition, lifestyle alignment, and consumption intention. By integrating Symbolic Consumption Theory, Consumer Identity Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and Digital Consumer Culture literature, the framework offers a more comprehensive explanation of how symbolic meanings influence consumer behavior within platform-mediated environments.

The proposed model shifts theoretical attention from symbolic meanings as static product attributes toward symbolic consumption as a dynamic process of identity performance, social validation, and behavioral reinforcement. Such a perspective reflects the realities of contemporary digital society, where visibility, recognition, and lifestyle coherence increasingly shape the ways consumers create value, construct identities, and engage with marketplace offerings. As digital environments continue to evolve, understanding these symbolic processes will become increasingly important for both consumer researchers and marketing practitioners seeking to explain and influence contemporary consumption behavior.

7. Conclusion

This paper began from the recognition that symbolic consumption theory, despite its substantial contributions to consumer research, has been largely developed within marketplace environments characterized by physical ownership, tangible possessions, and relatively bounded social interactions. While existing scholarship has successfully demonstrated that consumers derive value from the symbolic meanings associated with products, brands, and experiences, it provides a less comprehensive explanation of how symbolic meanings operate within contemporary digital society, where consumption increasingly unfolds through platform-mediated interactions, persistent visibility, algorithmic amplification, and networked social evaluation. The growing prominence of social media, creator economies, digital self-presentation, and platform-based recognition systems has fundamentally transformed the processes through which symbolic meanings are created, communicated, validated, and translated into consumption outcomes. Responding to this theoretical gap, the present study sought to develop a more integrated explanation of symbolic consumption by synthesizing Symbolic Consumption Theory, Consumer Identity Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and Digital Consumer Culture literature into a unified conceptual framework capable of explaining symbolic consumption within digitally mediated environments.

The central contribution of this study lies in the development of the Digital Symbolic Consumption Model (DSCM), which reconceptualizes symbolic consumption as a sequential

and socially embedded process rather than a static outcome of symbolic value attribution. Unlike traditional perspectives that primarily emphasize symbolic meanings embedded within marketplace offerings, the proposed framework demonstrates that symbolic consumption in contemporary digital society operates through interconnected mechanisms involving Symbolic Meaning, Identity Projection, Digital Visibility, Social Recognition, Lifestyle Alignment, and Consumption Intention. By explicitly incorporating visibility and recognition as theoretical constructs, the DSCM advances existing symbolic consumption literature and addresses an important omission within prior frameworks. The model proposes that symbolic meanings do not directly generate consumption intentions; rather, they become behaviorally influential through identity performances that are rendered visible, socially evaluated, and subsequently integrated into broader lifestyle systems. This sequential logic extends current understanding of symbolic consumption by positioning visibility and recognition as essential mediating mechanisms within contemporary digital consumer culture.

The study also contributes to broader theoretical debates concerning identity construction, consumer culture, and platform society. By integrating Consumer Identity Theory with Consumer Culture Theory and emerging scholarship on digital consumer culture, the framework clarifies how symbolic resources are transformed into socially recognized identities within networked environments. Furthermore, the incorporation of Digital Visibility acknowledges the growing role of platform infrastructures, algorithmic systems, and creator-mediated ecosystems in shaping symbolic value creation. In doing so, the study expands symbolic consumption research beyond traditional product-centered explanations and aligns it with contemporary developments associated with platformized consumer societies. The framework additionally contributes to the literature by highlighting Social Recognition as a critical mechanism linking identity expression and behavioral outcomes, thereby offering a more comprehensive explanation of how symbolic value becomes socially legitimized and behaviorally consequential.

Several practical implications emerge from these theoretical insights. For marketers, brand managers, and organizations, the findings suggest that symbolic value creation increasingly depends upon facilitating identity projection, visibility generation, and recognition opportunities rather than relying exclusively on functional product attributes. Brands may strengthen consumer engagement by supporting user-generated content, community participation, symbolic self-expression, and social validation mechanisms. The framework further suggests that successful marketplace offerings are likely to be those capable of integrating symbolic meanings into consumers' broader lifestyle narratives and identity projects. For organizations operating within digital ecosystems, understanding the interplay between symbolic meanings, visibility dynamics, and recognition processes may provide valuable guidance for developing more effective branding, communication, and customer engagement strategies.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. As a conceptual study, the DSCM remains theoretically derived and has not yet been subjected to empirical validation. The proposed relationships are grounded in extensive literature synthesis, yet future research is required to examine their empirical robustness across diverse consumption contexts, cultures, and platform environments. The framework also adopts a predominantly sequential perspective that may not fully capture reciprocal effects, feedback loops, and dynamic interactions that characterize contemporary digital consumption. Furthermore, while the model emphasizes digital consumer society, symbolic consumption processes may operate differently across contexts characterized by varying levels of technological adoption, cultural values, and platform dependence.

These limitations provide fertile opportunities for future inquiry. Empirical studies employing structural equation modeling, longitudinal designs, netnographic approaches, and digital ethnography may test and refine the proposed relationships. Future research may also investigate how algorithmic recommendation systems, artificial intelligence, influencer

ecosystems, virtual environments, metaverse platforms, and emerging forms of digital identity reshape symbolic consumption processes. Additional attention should be devoted to potential moderating factors such as cultural capital, self-monitoring, need for uniqueness, digital literacy, platform engagement intensity, and social media dependency. Comparative investigations across cultures, generations, and platform types would further enrich understanding of the contextual conditions under which symbolic consumption mechanisms operate.

Ultimately, this study argues that symbolic consumption can no longer be adequately understood through frameworks centered solely on products, possessions, or symbolic meanings themselves. In contemporary digital society, symbolic consumption increasingly unfolds through visible identity performances, socially mediated recognition processes, and platform-governed systems of meaning circulation. The Digital Symbolic Consumption Model provides a theoretically integrated foundation for understanding these transformations and offers a new lens through which scholars can examine the evolving relationship between consumption, identity, culture, and technology. As consumer life becomes progressively embedded within interconnected digital ecosystems, the ability to explain how symbolic meanings are converted into recognition, lifestyle alignment, and behavioral outcomes will become increasingly essential for advancing consumer research and understanding the future trajectory of marketplace behavior.

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