

DIGITAL DEBT AS 'SELF-REWARD: RECONCILING GEN Z'S PAYLATER CONSUMPTION WITH ISLAMIC FINANCIAL ETHICH

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Abstract: *This study explores digital debt practices among Generation Z by framing paylater consumption as a form of self-reward in the digital economy and examining its compatibility with Islamic financial ethics. The ease of access, instant gratification, and lifestyle-oriented marketing of paylater services encourage Gen Z to normalize deferred payments as part of everyday consumption. While such mechanisms provide short-term satisfaction and perceived financial flexibility, they also pose ethical challenges related to debt accumulation, self-control, and moral responsibility. From the perspective of Islamic finance, consumption is expected to be guided by principles of balance (wasatiyyah), responsibility, and the avoidance of exploitative financial elements. This study employs a normative and conceptual analysis to assess whether paylater practices can be ethically justified when aligned with Islamic values. The analysis indicates that digital debt may be tolerated as a conditional financial instrument when it avoids usury, ensures transparency, and supports genuine needs rather than impulsive desires. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating Islamic financial ethics with digital consumer behavior to promote sustainable and morally grounded financial practices among Generation Z.*

Keywords: *Digital debt; Paylater; Generation Z; Self-reward; Islamic financial ethics*

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed consumption patterns among younger generations, particularly Generation Z, who have grown up alongside the expansion of digital platforms and technology based financial services (*financial technology*) (Prensky, 2001). One of the most prominent innovations is the *paylater* service, a deferred payment system that allows consumers to obtain goods or services immediately and pay for them at a later time (Suryono, Budi, & Purwandari, 2020). Ease of access, fast approval processes, and integration with e-commerce platforms have made *paylater* a popular financial instrument among Gen Z (Deloitte, 2022).

The use of *paylater* is not merely associated with economic needs but also reflects psychological and social shifts in the meaning of consumption. For many Gen Z consumers, digital debt is perceived as a form of *self-reward*, representing personal appreciation for achievements, hard work, or as a coping mechanism for psychological pressure in the digital era (Arisandy & Hurriyati, 2021). This pattern indicates a transition from needs-based consumption to consumption driven by instant gratification and symbolic value (Bauman, 2007).

However, the normalization of debt as a lifestyle raises ethical concerns, particularly when viewed through the lens of Islamic financial values. In Islamic teachings, debt is fundamentally permissible as a form of mutual assistance (*ta'āwun*), yet it becomes problematic

when it involves elements of *riba*, *gharar*, or encourages excessive and wasteful consumption (*isrāf*) (Qardhawi, 1997). Principles of prudence, balance (*wasatiyyah*), and moral responsibility serve as core foundations in the financial conduct of a Muslim (Chapra, 2000).

Therefore, it is essential to examine how *paylater* practices as a form of digital debt can be understood and reconciled with Islamic financial ethics, particularly in the context of Generation Z's consumption behavior. This discussion is relevant not only for explaining contemporary socio-economic realities but also for offering an ethical and normative framework to address the challenges of consumption in the digital era (Huda & Santoso, 2020).

Furthermore, the discussion of *paylater* consumption among Generation Z cannot be separated from the broader structural dynamics of the digital economy. Platform-based capitalism encourages continuous consumption through algorithms that predict preferences, offer instant credit, and normalize debt as a routine financial practice (Srniczek, 2017). Within this environment, financial decision-making is increasingly automated and emotionally driven, reducing the space for critical reflection and ethical consideration (Zuboff, 2019). For Gen Z, whose social interactions and identities are closely intertwined with digital platforms, consumption facilitated by *paylater* becomes not only an economic act but also a social and symbolic one, reinforcing status, belonging, and self-image (Belk, 2013).

From the standpoint of behavioral economics, the deferred payment mechanism exploits cognitive biases such as present bias and optimism bias, leading individuals to underestimate future financial burdens while overvaluing immediate satisfaction (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). These behavioral tendencies challenge the Islamic ethical emphasis on foresight (*ta'qqul*), self-discipline (*mujāhadah al-nafs*), and accountability for one's financial commitments (Chapra, 2000). In Islamic teachings, debt is considered a serious moral responsibility, and excessive indebtedness is discouraged due to its potential to compromise personal dignity and social harmony (Qardhawi, 1997).

At the policy and institutional level, the rapid expansion of *paylater* services has outpaced the development of ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks that adequately protect young consumers. While some regulatory bodies have begun to address consumer protection and transparency issues, the ethical dimension of digital debt particularly from an Islamic perspective remains underexplored (OECD, 2021). This gap highlights the urgent need for collaboration between policymakers, Islamic financial institutions, and digital platform providers to design alternative models of deferred payment that comply with Sharia principles and promote responsible consumption (El-Gamal, 2006).

Accordingly, this study seeks to extend the discourse on digital finance by situating *paylater* consumption within the ethical framework of Islamic economics. Rather than adopting a binary stance of acceptance or rejection, the study argues for a contextual and principled approach that evaluates digital financial practices based on their structure, intention, and socio-economic impact. Such an approach is expected to contribute to both academic debates and practical solutions aimed at harmonizing technological innovation with Islamic moral values, particularly for Generation Z navigating the complexities of the post-digital financial landscape.

Literature Review

1. Digital Consumption and Generation Z

Generation Z is widely recognized as a cohort that is highly adaptive to digital technology, shaping distinct consumption patterns characterized by speed, convenience, and personalization (Prensky, 2001). Previous studies indicate that Gen Z consumers are more inclined toward digital financial services due to their familiarity with mobile applications, e-commerce platforms, and cashless transactions (Deloitte, 2022). This technological immersion

has encouraged a shift from traditional budgeting practices to flexible and short-term financial decision-making, often prioritizing immediacy over long-term financial planning (Twenge, 2017).

Scholars argue that digital consumption among Gen Z is not purely functional but also symbolic, serving as a means of identity construction and social validation (Belk, 2013). Within this context, access to instant credit mechanisms such as *paylater* strengthens the culture of immediate gratification and reinforces consumptive lifestyles (Ritzer, 2015). As a result, debt is increasingly perceived as a normal and acceptable component of everyday consumption rather than a financial risk to be carefully managed (Bauman, 2007).

2. Paylater and Digital Debt Behavior

The *paylater* system, as part of the broader *buy now, pay later* (BNPL) model, has attracted scholarly attention due to its rapid adoption among young consumers. Research suggests that the simplicity of registration, minimal credit assessment, and deferred payment structure significantly influence user adoption, particularly among individuals with limited income stability (Suryono, Budi, & Purwandari, 2020). While *paylater* services offer short-term liquidity and perceived financial flexibility, several studies highlight their potential to increase impulsive buying and overconsumption (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

Behavioral finance literature explains that deferred payment schemes exploit cognitive biases, such as present bias and mental accounting, which cause consumers to underestimate future repayment obligations (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Empirical findings further reveal that young users often fail to fully understand fee structures, penalties, and long-term financial consequences, leading to increased vulnerability to debt accumulation (OECD, 2021). These patterns suggest that digital debt functions not only as a financial tool but also as a psychological mechanism that reshapes consumer attitudes toward responsibility and risk.

3. Self-Reward and Psychological Dimensions of Consumption

The concept of *self-reward* has been extensively discussed in consumer psychology as a justification strategy that allows individuals to legitimize indulgent consumption (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). In the digital era, self-reward is increasingly facilitated by financial technologies that remove traditional consumption barriers, such as immediate cash availability (Arisandy & Hurriyati, 2021). For Generation Z, *paylater* serves as a tool that bridges emotional needs and material gratification, particularly in response to academic pressure, work-related stress, and social comparison intensified by social media (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Studies indicate that framing consumption as self-reward can weaken self-control mechanisms and normalize repetitive debt usage, especially when supported by persuasive digital interfaces and promotional narratives (Zuboff, 2019). This psychological framing transforms debt from a last-resort financial instrument into a routine lifestyle choice, thereby increasing the risk of financial distress over time (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

4. Islamic Financial Ethics and Digital Debt

Islamic economic literature emphasizes that financial activities must align with ethical principles derived from Sharia, including justice (*'adl*), transparency, moderation (*wasatiyyah*), and the avoidance of *riba* and *gharar* (Chapra, 2000). Debt is permissible in Islam as a form of mutual assistance (*ta'awun*), yet excessive indebtedness and exploitative financial arrangements are strongly discouraged (Qardhawi, 1997). From this perspective, consumption should be guided by necessity, social benefit, and moral accountability rather than desire driven impulses.

Several scholars argue that many contemporary digital credit products, including *paylater*, operate within conventional financial systems that may conflict with Islamic ethical norms due to interest-based charges and punitive penalties (El-Gamal, 2006). This creates an ethical dilemma for Muslim consumers, particularly Gen Z, who seek to balance participation in

the digital economy with adherence to religious values (Huda & Santoso, 2020). Consequently, the literature highlights the need for Sharia-compliant digital financial innovations and strengthened Islamic financial literacy to ensure that technological advancement supports, rather than undermines, ethical consumption practices (OECD, 2021).

5. Sharia-Compliant Alternatives and Ethical Financial Innovation

Recent literature increasingly emphasizes the importance of developing Sharia-compliant alternatives to conventional digital credit systems in response to the growing demand among Muslim consumers (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007). Scholars argue that Islamic financial innovation should not merely replicate conventional products with superficial adjustments, but rather embed ethical objectives (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) at the core of product design (Chapra, 2000). In the context of *paylater*, this implies structuring deferred payment mechanisms based on permissible contracts such as *murābahah*, *qard al-ḥasan*, or *ijarah*, while ensuring transparency, fairness, and the absence of interest-based penalties (El-Gamal, 2006).

Empirical studies suggest that Sharia-compliant financial products can positively influence consumer trust and promote more responsible financial behavior when accompanied by clear ethical narratives and education (Huda & Santoso, 2020). For Generation Z, who are highly responsive to value-driven branding and social responsibility, ethically framed digital financial services may offer a viable pathway to reconcile lifestyle needs with religious commitments (Deloitte, 2022). This highlights the strategic role of Islamic fintech (*Islamic FinTech*) in shaping a more sustainable digital financial ecosystem.

6. Financial Literacy and Moral Agency

Another critical theme in the literature concerns the role of financial literacy in mediating the relationship between digital credit usage and consumer behavior. Studies consistently demonstrate that low levels of financial literacy among young adults are associated with higher susceptibility to impulsive consumption and debt mismanagement (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). In the Islamic context, financial literacy extends beyond technical knowledge to include moral awareness, ethical reasoning, and accountability before God (*taqwā*) (Chapra, 2000).

Researchers argue that strengthening Islamic financial literacy among Gen Z can enhance moral agency, enabling individuals to critically evaluate digital financial products and resist consumption practices that conflict with ethical values (Qardhawi, 1997). Educational interventions that integrate financial skills with Islamic ethical teachings are therefore viewed as essential in addressing the challenges posed by digital debt culture (OECD, 2021). Such approaches shift the focus from reactive regulation to proactive character and value formation.

7. Research Gaps and Conceptual Framework

Despite the growing body of research on digital consumption, *paylater*, and Islamic finance, the literature reveals several gaps that warrant further investigation. First, many existing studies examine *paylater* primarily from economic or behavioral perspectives, with limited attention to its ethical and religious implications for Muslim youth (Suryono, Budi, & Purwandari, 2020). Second, the concept of digital debt as *self-reward* remains underexplored within Islamic ethical discourse, particularly in relation to Generation Z's socio-psychological context (Arisandy & Hurriyati, 2021).

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by integrating insights from consumer psychology, digital finance, and Islamic economic ethics into a unified analytical framework. By conceptualizing *paylater* consumption as both a financial practice and a moral phenomenon, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how Generation Z negotiates pleasure, responsibility, and faith in the digital economy. This integrative approach is expected to enrich

scholarly discourse and inform policy, education, and ethical innovation in Islamic digital finance.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a conceptual and normative approach to examine digital debt practices particularly *paylater* consumption among Generation Z and their reconciliation with Islamic financial ethics. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate as the study aims to explore meanings, values, and ethical interpretations rather than to measure causal relationships statistically (Creswell, 2014). By focusing on conceptual analysis, this research situates *paylater* not only as a financial instrument but also as a socio-ethical phenomenon embedded in digital culture.

Data collection is conducted through an extensive literature review of academic journals, books, policy reports, and authoritative publications related to digital finance, consumer behavior, Generation Z, and Islamic economics. Relevant sources are identified using key terms such as *digital debt*, *paylater*, *self-reward consumption*, *Generation Z*, and *Islamic financial ethics* across reputable academic databases (Snyder, 2019). The selected literature is critically reviewed to identify dominant themes, theoretical perspectives, and ethical arguments surrounding deferred payment systems and youth consumption behavior.

The analytical framework of this study integrates insights from consumer psychology, behavioral economics, and Islamic economic thought. Concepts such as self-reward, present bias, and impulsive consumption are analyzed alongside Islamic ethical principles, including *maqāsid al-sharī'ah*, *wasatiyyah*, *ta'āwun*, and the prohibition of *riba* and *gharar* (Chapra, 2000; Qardhawi, 1997). This integrative analysis enables a systematic evaluation of whether and under what conditions *paylater* practices may be considered ethically acceptable within an Islamic framework.

Data analysis follows a thematic and interpretative procedure. Key arguments and findings from the literature are categorized into thematic clusters, such as digital consumption patterns, psychological motivations, ethical risks, and Sharia-compliant alternatives. These themes are then interpreted normatively to assess their alignment with Islamic financial ethics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, the study develops a conceptual synthesis that highlights both the ethical challenges and potential pathways for harmonizing digital financial innovation with Islamic moral values, particularly for Generation Z in the contemporary digital economy.

Furthermore, to strengthen analytical rigor, this study applies a critical-comparative method by contrasting conventional *paylater* mechanisms with normative principles derived from Islamic finance. This comparison allows the identification of ethical discrepancies, such as interest-based charges, penalty structures, and consumption incentives, which may contradict Sharia values (El-Gamal, 2006). By juxtaposing these elements with Islamic contractual models, the study highlights possible areas for ethical reform and adaptation within digital credit systems.

To ensure credibility and validity, the study adopts a source triangulation strategy by drawing upon multidisciplinary literature from economics, psychology, sociology, and Islamic studies. This approach minimizes conceptual bias and enhances the robustness of the ethical interpretation (Creswell, 2014). Authoritative works by leading scholars in Islamic economics and consumer behavior are prioritized to ensure theoretical reliability and normative depth (Chapra, 2000; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

Although this research does not involve empirical fieldwork, its methodological contribution lies in developing a structured ethical framework that can be utilized for future empirical investigations. The conceptual model generated from this study may serve as a

reference for subsequent quantitative or mixed-method research examining Muslim Gen Z's financial behavior, attitudes toward digital debt, and responses to Sharia-compliant *paylater* products.

Finally, ethical considerations are central to this methodological approach. The study maintains academic integrity by accurately representing scholarly arguments and avoiding normative bias. Rather than issuing prescriptive judgments, the analysis seeks to offer reflective and constructive insights into how digital financial practices can be ethically aligned with Islamic values. In doing so, the method supports the broader objective of promoting responsible, value-based consumption and sustainable financial behavior among Generation Z in the evolving digital economy.

Result and Discussion

1. Digital Debt as Self-Reward among Generation Z

The analysis of existing literature indicates that *paylater* usage among Generation Z is strongly associated with psychological motivations rather than purely economic necessity. Many studies confirm that Gen Z consumers tend to frame deferred payment consumption as a form of *self-reward*, legitimizing spending as compensation for stress, academic pressure, or work-related fatigue (Mick & DeMoss, 1990; Arisandy & Hurriyati, 2021). This finding supports consumer psychology theories which argue that self-reward functions as a cognitive justification mechanism that reduces guilt associated with indulgent consumption (Belk, 2013).

In the digital environment, *paylater* platforms intensify this behavior by minimizing transactional friction and emphasizing affordability through small installments rather than total cost (Ritzer, 2015). As a result, debt is psychologically reframed as a manageable and routine financial tool. Empirical studies further reveal that Gen Z users often prioritize short-term emotional satisfaction over long-term financial consequences, reinforcing a present-oriented consumption mindset (Twenge, 2017). This normalization of digital debt marks a significant shift from traditional perceptions of debt as a last resort toward its acceptance as part of lifestyle consumption (Bauman, 2007).

2. Ethical Implications from an Islamic Financial Perspective

From the standpoint of Islamic financial ethics, these findings raise critical concerns. While Islam permits debt as a form of mutual assistance (*ta'āwun*), it strongly discourages excessive indebtedness and consumption driven by desire rather than necessity (Qardhawi, 1997). The results suggest that *paylater* consumption framed as self-reward often contradicts the Islamic principle of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and the objective of preserving wealth (*hifz al-māl*) within the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (Chapra, 2000).

Moreover, many *paylater* schemes operate within conventional financial structures that include interest-based charges, late-payment penalties, and insufficient transparency regarding fees (El-Gamal, 2006). Such elements potentially fall under *riba* and *gharar*, rendering them ethically problematic from an Islamic perspective. The literature indicates that Muslim Gen Z consumers frequently lack awareness of these ethical implications, highlighting a gap between religious values and actual financial practices (Huda & Santoso, 2020).

3. Behavioral Biases and Moral Responsibility

The discussion also reveals that behavioral biases play a significant role in shaping *paylater* usage. Present bias and optimism bias lead consumers to underestimate future repayment burdens while overvaluing immediate gratification (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). From an Islamic ethical viewpoint, this behavior conflicts with the emphasis on foresight (*ta'aqqul*), self-discipline, and accountability (*amanah*) in financial decision-making (Chapra, 2000). Debt

in Islam is not merely a contractual obligation but a moral responsibility that carries spiritual consequences if mismanaged (Qardhawi, 1997).

These findings suggest that the ethical issue surrounding *paylater* is not limited to product structure alone but also involves consumer intention (*niyyah*) and behavioral control. When *paylater* is used primarily for impulsive self-reward rather than genuine need, it risks fostering a culture of irresponsible consumption that undermines both financial stability and moral integrity.

4. Reconciliation through Ethical Design and Financial Literacy

Despite these concerns, the discussion also points toward potential pathways for reconciliation between digital debt practices and Islamic financial ethics. Several scholars argue that deferred payment mechanisms may be ethically acceptable if they are structured according to Sharia-compliant contracts, free from *riba*, transparent, and oriented toward real economic value rather than excessive consumption (El-Gamal, 2006; Chapra, 2000). This opens opportunities for Islamic fintech innovation to design ethical *paylater* alternatives that align with Islamic moral objectives.

In addition, the results emphasize the crucial role of Islamic financial literacy in shaping responsible consumption behavior. Studies consistently show that higher levels of financial literacy are associated with better debt management and reduced impulsive spending (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). In the Islamic context, financial literacy should integrate technical knowledge with ethical and spiritual awareness, enabling Gen Z consumers to critically assess digital financial products and resist consumption driven solely by self-reward narratives (OECD, 2021).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital debt as self-reward represents a complex socio-ethical phenomenon. While *paylater* offers convenience and short-term satisfaction, its uncritical adoption risks conflicting with Islamic financial ethics. Therefore, reconciling Gen Z's *paylater* consumption with Islamic values requires a multidimensional approach involving ethical product design, regulatory oversight, and value-based financial education to ensure sustainable and morally grounded financial behavior in the digital era.

5. Socio-Economic Consequences and Long-Term Financial Well-Being

Further discussion of the findings reveals that the widespread use of *paylater* services among Generation Z has broader socio-economic implications. Several studies indicate that persistent reliance on digital debt may contribute to long-term financial fragility, particularly for young adults who have not yet established stable income streams (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). When self-reward consumption is repeatedly financed through deferred payments, debt obligations can accumulate quietly, increasing the risk of financial stress, delayed savings, and reduced economic resilience in later life stages (OECD, 2021).

From an Islamic economic perspective, such outcomes contradict the ethical objective of ensuring financial well-being (*falāḥ*) at both individual and societal levels (Chapra, 2000). Islam views wealth not merely as a personal asset but as a trust (*amānah*) that must be managed responsibly to support personal stability and social justice. Therefore, the normalization of digital debt as a lifestyle choice may undermine the broader social ethics of Islamic economics by perpetuating cycles of dependency and vulnerability among young consumers (Qardhawi, 1997).

6. Digital Culture, Social Pressure, and Ethical Tension

The discussion also highlights the role of digital culture and social pressure in intensifying *paylater* usage. Social media platforms amplify consumption norms by continuously displaying curated lifestyles that equate success and happiness with material ownership (Zuboff, 2019). For Generation Z, the desire to maintain social relevance and peer acceptance often

intersects with the availability of instant credit, reinforcing consumption motivated by comparison rather than necessity (Belk, 2013).

This environment creates an ethical tension for Muslim consumers, who are encouraged by Islamic teachings to avoid extravagance (*tabdhīr*) and to practice contentment (*qanā'ah*) (Qardhawi, 1997). The findings suggest that without ethical counter-narratives and institutional support, Gen Z may struggle to reconcile religious values with digitally mediated consumption pressures. This underscores the importance of embedding ethical discourse within digital financial ecosystems rather than relying solely on individual self-restraint.

7. Implications for Policy, Education, and Islamic FinTech

Finally, the results carry important implications for policymakers, educators, and Islamic financial institutions. Regulatory frameworks should move beyond consumer protection in a narrow legal sense and incorporate ethical considerations, such as transparency, fairness, and the prevention of exploitative debt practices (OECD, 2021). At the educational level, integrating Islamic financial ethics into formal and informal financial literacy programs can empower Generation Z to make informed and value-consistent financial decisions (Chapra, 2000).

For Islamic FinTech providers, the findings emphasize the need to innovate responsibly by designing *paylater*-like services that prioritize necessity-based consumption, flexible repayment without interest, and ethical nudges that discourage overuse. Such initiatives align with the broader objective of harmonizing technological advancement with Islamic moral values, ensuring that digital finance serves as a tool for empowerment rather than a source of ethical compromise.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the phenomenon of *paylater* consumption among Generation Z reflects a broader transformation in digital financial behavior, where digital debt is increasingly perceived as a form of self-reward rather than a financial obligation that requires careful consideration. The findings indicate that psychological motivations, digital convenience, and social pressures play a significant role in normalizing deferred payment systems within Gen Z's lifestyle. While *paylater* services offer short-term flexibility and emotional satisfaction, their uncritical use poses risks of overconsumption, debt accumulation, and long-term financial vulnerability (Bauman, 2007; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

From the perspective of Islamic financial ethics, this pattern presents a clear ethical challenge. Although debt is permissible in Islam as a form of mutual assistance (*ta'āwun*), its use must align with principles of moderation (*wasatiyyah*), responsibility (*amanah*), and the avoidance of *riba* and *gharar* (Qardhawi, 1997; Chapra, 2000). The study demonstrates that many contemporary *paylater* practices potentially conflict with these values, particularly when consumption is driven by impulsive self-reward rather than genuine need.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights that reconciliation between digital debt practices and Islamic ethics is possible. Ethical alignment can be achieved through Sharia-compliant financial design, stronger regulatory oversight, and the integration of Islamic financial literacy that combines technical knowledge with moral awareness (El-Gamal, 2006; OECD, 2021). Ultimately, promoting responsible, value-based digital consumption among Generation Z requires a collaborative effort between policymakers, educators, and Islamic fintech innovators to ensure that technological advancement supports sustainable financial well-being and moral integrity in the digital era.

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