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# Do Discounts and Free Shipping Drive Online Purchase Decisions? Insights from Generation Z E-Commerce Consumers

**Iskananda Relian Santri**
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kerinci, Indonesia

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**E-mail**:
iskanandareliansantri@gmail.com

**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study aims to examine whether price promotion strategies—specifically discounts and free shipping—significantly influence online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers in the Indonesian e-commerce context.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A quantitative research design was employed using a survey method. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to 120 respondents aged 18–25 who actively shop on Shopee. The sampling technique applied was purposive sampling. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using SPSS 25 to test the proposed hypotheses.

**Findings:** The results reveal that both discounts and free shipping have a positive and significant effect on online purchase decisions. Free shipping emerges as the more dominant factor, as it is perceived to provide greater economic value and reduce transaction-related cost concerns among Generation Z consumers.

**Research implications:** The findings reinforce consumer behavior theory by highlighting the critical role of price-related incentives and transaction convenience in shaping purchasing decisions in the digital marketplace. Practically, the study suggests that e-commerce platforms should strategically prioritize free shipping programs alongside discount promotions to effectively attract and retain young consumers in highly competitive online markets.



## Introduction

The rapid expansion of the digital economy has fundamentally transformed consumer purchasing behavior, particularly in emerging markets such as Indonesia. The acceleration of internet penetration and smartphone diffusion has positioned e-commerce as a dominant consumption channel across demographic segments. In digital environments, the traditional customer journey has evolved into a technology-mediated decision process characterized by high price transparency, instant information access, and algorithm-driven promotional exposure (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This transformation intensifies competition among e-commerce platforms, compelling firms to adopt aggressive promotional strategies to influence consumer decisions.

Price-based promotional strategies—especially discounts and free shipping—have become central tactical instruments in online retail competition. Monetary incentives enhance perceived transaction value and reduce perceived financial risk, both of which are critical determinants of online purchase behavior (Rita, Oliveira, & Farisa, 2019). From a behavioral perspective, discounts create a perception of economic gain and urgency, while free shipping eliminates additional cost burdens that are psychologically perceived as losses (Vieira, 2018). In digital marketplaces, where consumers can easily compare prices across platforms, such promotional mechanisms significantly shape purchase intention and final decision-making.

Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the most digitally immersed consumer cohort. As digital natives, they are highly adaptive to technological interfaces, price-sensitive, and strongly influenced by online promotional stimuli (Priporas, Stylos, & Fotiadis, 2017). Studies suggest that Generation Z consumers demonstrate value-oriented consumption behavior, prioritizing economic efficiency, convenience, and immediacy in online transactions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Their purchasing decisions are not merely rational calculations of price but are also shaped by perceived value and transaction convenience embedded within digital ecosystems.

The psychological mechanism underlying promotional responsiveness can be further explained through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. In this context, discounts and free shipping function as external stimuli (S) that influence internal evaluations such as perceived value, perceived savings, and emotional satisfaction (O), ultimately leading to purchase decisions (R). Free shipping may generate stronger behavioral responses because it removes perceived transactional barriers, whereas discounts increase perceived deal attractiveness. However, empirical findings remain mixed regarding which promotional instrument exerts stronger influence, particularly among Generation Z consumers in non-metropolitan settings.

Most prior research has concentrated on large urban populations, where infrastructure quality, income levels, and digital literacy are relatively high (Ladhari, Gonthier, & Lajante, 2019). Limited empirical evidence exists regarding how promotional strategies influence Generation Z consumers in semi-urban or rural areas, where socio-economic structures and purchasing patterns may differ significantly. Contextual factors such as regional purchasing power, access to logistics services, and community-based consumption culture may moderate responsiveness to discount-based versus cost-elimination incentives.

In Desa Tebing Tinggi, increasing digital connectivity has facilitated broader engagement with online shopping platforms such as Shopee. Nevertheless, empirical research examining how price promotions shape online purchase decisions among Generation Z in such localized contexts remains scarce. Given the region's evolving digital adoption and the strong price sensitivity typically associated with young consumers, investigating the relative influence of discounts and free shipping becomes both theoretically and practically significant.

Therefore, this study aims to examine whether discounts and free shipping significantly influence online purchase decisions among Generation Z e-commerce consumers. The novelty of this research lies in three main contributions. First, it extends digital consumer behavior literature by examining Generation Z in a semi-urban context, an area underexplored in prior empirical studies dominated by metropolitan samples. Second, it adopts a comparative perspective to identify which price-based promotional mechanism—direct price reduction (discount) or cost

elimination (free shipping)—exerts a more dominant behavioral effect. Third, by implicitly grounding the analysis within the S-O-R framework, this study provides theoretical clarification on how external promotional stimuli translate into purchase decisions among value-oriented digital natives in emerging markets. Through this integrative approach, the research contributes to a more contextualized and theoretically informed understanding of promotional effectiveness in competitive digital marketplaces.

## Literature Review

### Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Framework

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, originally developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), explains how environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal states, which subsequently shape behavioral responses. In digital commerce, this model has been widely applied to understand how online environmental cues affect consumers' cognitive and emotional evaluations before leading to purchase behavior (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001). Within this framework, marketing stimuli such as price promotions act as external triggers that influence internal evaluations—such as perceived value and perceived savings—which then result in purchasing decisions (Islam & Rahman, 2017).

In the context of e-commerce, discounts and free shipping function as promotional stimuli (S), influencing consumers' psychological states (O), including perceived economic benefit and convenience, which ultimately determine the purchase decision (R). The S-O-R model is particularly relevant in digital retail settings where visual promotional cues, algorithm-driven recommendations, and price transparency intensify consumer responsiveness (Pandita, Mishra, & Chib, 2023). Therefore, this study adopts the S-O-R framework as the theoretical foundation for examining how promotional strategies shape online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers.

### Discounts and Online Purchase Decision

Discounts represent direct monetary incentives that reduce the listed price of products, thereby increasing perceived savings and deal attractiveness. From a consumer behavior perspective, price discounts generate positive affective reactions and enhance perceived value, which significantly increases purchase intention (Vieira, 2018). In digital marketplaces, where price comparisons are easily accessible, discounts serve as competitive signals that attract attention and stimulate immediate buying responses (Algharabat et al., 2020).

Generation Z consumers are known for their high price sensitivity and strong orientation toward economic value (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Discounts may therefore act as a powerful stimulus that enhances internal evaluations of value and urgency, ultimately leading to purchase decisions. Within the S-O-R framework, discounts function as external stimuli that positively affect consumers' cognitive assessments, resulting in favorable behavioral outcomes.

**H1:** *Discounts have a positive and significant effect on online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers*

### Free Shipping and Online Purchase Decision

Shipping costs are frequently perceived as additional financial burdens in online transactions. Behavioral research indicates that consumers mentally categorize shipping fees as losses, which can reduce purchase intention (Huang & Kuo, 2012). Consequently, free shipping programs eliminate perceived transactional barriers and enhance perceived fairness and value in online purchases (Rita, Oliveira, & Farisa, 2019). Free shipping differs from discounts in its psychological mechanism. While discounts increase perceived savings, free shipping reduces perceived extra costs and simplifies the purchasing process. Studies show that eliminating shipping fees significantly increases purchase likelihood and reduces cart abandonment rates (Alalwan, Dwivedi, & Rana, 2017). For Generation Z consumers who prioritize efficiency and transparency, free shipping may produce stronger internal evaluations of convenience and economic benefit.

Within the S-O-R perspective, free shipping acts as a cost-elimination stimulus that positively influences internal perceptions of value and fairness, leading to higher probability of purchase decisions.

**H2:** *Free shipping has a positive and significant effect on online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers*

## Methods

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey to examine the effects of discounts and free shipping on online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers, grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework (Eroglu et al., 2001). The population consists of Shopee users aged 18–25 years who have made at least one purchase in the last six months. Using purposive sampling, a minimum of 150 respondents was targeted following Hair et al. (2019) recommendations for multivariate analysis. Data were collected through an online questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Discounts were measured through perceived attractiveness and savings (Vieira, 2018), free shipping through perceived cost elimination and reduced hesitation (Rita et al., 2019), and online purchase decision through purchase action and repurchase intention indicators (Alalwan et al., 2017). Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25. Descriptive statistics were first conducted to examine respondent characteristics and variable distributions.

## Result and Discussion

### Validity and Reliability Testing

The validity test results indicate that all measurement items meet the required criteria. The Pearson Product–Moment correlation coefficients for all indicators exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.30 and were statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. These findings confirm that each item adequately represents its respective construct, namely discounts, free shipping, and online purchase decision.

Reliability testing further demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency across all variables. The Cronbach's Alpha values were 0.82 for discounts, 0.85 for free shipping, and 0.88 for online purchase decision, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Additionally, no substantial increase in reliability was observed under the "alpha if item deleted" analysis, indicating that all indicators contribute consistently to their respective constructs.

Overall, the results confirm that the measurement instrument is both valid and reliable, and therefore suitable for subsequent regression analysis.

**Classical Assumption Tests**

Prior to conducting multiple linear regression analysis, classical assumption tests were performed to ensure that the regression model met the required statistical assumptions.

**1. Normality Test**

The normality test was conducted using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The results showed that the significance value was greater than 0.05, indicating that the residuals were normally distributed.

**Table 1.** Normality Test Result

| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | Alpha | Info. |
|---|---|---|
| 0.215 | 0.05 | Normal |

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (2025)

The normality test was conducted using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to examine whether the regression residuals were normally distributed. As presented in Table 1, the Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) value is 0.215, which is greater than the significance level of 0.05. This result indicates that the residuals are normally distributed. Therefore, the normality assumption required for multiple linear regression analysis has been satisfied.

**2. Multicolinearity Test**

Multicollinearity was assessed using tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. The tolerance values for discounts and free shipping were above 0.10, while the VIF values were below 10. These results indicate the absence of multicollinearity among the independent variables.

**Table 2.** Multicolinearity Test Result

| Model | VIF | Cut off point | Tolerance | Cut off point | Info. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Discount | 0,874 | 0,10 | 1.554 | 10 | No Multicolinearity |
| Free Shipping | 0,523 | | 0.987 | | |

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (2025)

Multicollinearity was examined using tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. As presented in Table 2, the tolerance values for Discount and Free Shipping are above the minimum threshold of 0.10, while the VIF values are below the cut-off point of 10. These findings indicate that there is no high correlation between the independent variables. Therefore, the regression model is free from multicollinearity issues, and both predictors can be included simultaneously in the multiple linear regression analysis.

**3. Heteroscedasticity Test**

Heteroscedasticity was examined using the Glejser test. The significance values for both independent variables exceeded 0.05, suggesting that no heteroscedasticity problem was detected in the regression model.

**Table 3.** Heteroscedasticity Test Result

| Model | Sig. | Alpha | Info. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discount | 0.642 | 0.05 | No Heteroscedasticity |
| Free Shipping | 0.521 | | |

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (2025)

Heteroscedasticity was tested using the Glejser method to determine whether the variance of residuals was constant across all levels of the independent variables. As shown in Table 3, the significance value for Discount is 0.642 and for Free Shipping is 0.521. Both values exceed the significance level of 0.05.

These results indicate that neither independent variable exhibits heteroscedasticity. Therefore, the regression model satisfies the homoscedasticity assumption, confirming that the residual variance is constant and the model is statistically appropriate for hypothesis testing.

**Multiple Linear Regression Analysis**

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of Discount and Free Shipping on Online Purchase Decision.

**Table 4.** Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Test Result

| Model | β | Sig. | Info. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 2.942 | 0.000 | Align |
| Discount | 0.084 | 0.136 | No Significant |
| Free Shipping | 0.826 | 0.000 | Align |

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (2025)

Table 4 presents the results of the multiple linear regression analysis. The regression equation can be formulated as follows:

$$Y = 2.942 + 0.084X_1 + 0.826X_2$$

The constant value of 2.942 indicates that when Discount ($X_1$) and Free Shipping ($X_2$) are assumed to be zero, the baseline level of Online Purchase Decision is 2.942. This reflects the inherent purchasing tendency of respondents independent of promotional factors. The regression coefficient for Discount (0.084) indicates that for every one-unit increase in perceived discount, Online Purchase Decision increases by 0.084 units, assuming Free Shipping remains constant. However, based on the significance test ($p = 0.136 > 0.05$), this effect is not statistically significant. Therefore, discounts do not meaningfully influence purchase decisions in this model. The regression coefficient for Free Shipping (0.826) indicates that for every one-unit increase in perceived free shipping benefit, Online Purchase Decision increases by 0.826 units, holding Discount constant. Since the significance value is 0.000 (< 0.05), this effect is statistically significant and substantial.

The equation demonstrates that Free Shipping is the dominant predictor of Online Purchase Decision among Generation Z consumers, while Discount does not significantly drive purchasing behavior in this context. The magnitude of the Free Shipping coefficient (0.826) further confirms its stronger explanatory power compared to Discount (0.084).

**Coefficient of Determination ($R^2$)**

The $R^2$ value indicates the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variables, namely Discount and Free Shipping.

**Table 5.** Coefficient of Determination

| R Square | Adjusted R Square | Info. |
|---|---|---|
| 0.915 | 0.914 | Strong |

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (2025)

Based on Table 5, the R Square value is 0.915, indicating that 91.5% of the variance in Online Purchase Decision can be explained by the independent variables, namely Discount and Free Shipping. Meanwhile, the Adjusted R Square value is 0.914, suggesting that after adjusting for the number of predictors in the model, 91.4% of the variation in Online Purchase Decision is accounted for by the regression model. This high coefficient of determination indicates that the model has strong explanatory power. It suggests that promotional factors, particularly Free Shipping, play a substantial role in influencing online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers. The remaining 8.6% of variance is influenced by other variables not included in this study.

Overall, the regression model demonstrates a very strong goodness-of-fit in explaining purchasing behavior in the examined context.

**Model Fit**

Model fit was evaluated using the F-test to examine the simultaneous effect of trust, sharia compliance, and technology quality on the adoption of digital financial innovation at Bank Syariah Indonesia.

**Table 6.** Model Fit

| F-test | F table | Sig. | Info |
|---|---|---|---|
| 632.971 | 3.06 | 0.000 | Model Fit |

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (2025)

The F-test was conducted to examine the overall significance of the regression model. As presented in Table 6, the calculated F-value (F = 632.971) is substantially higher than the F-table value (3.06), with a significance level of 0.000, which is below the threshold of 0.05. These results indicate that the regression model is statistically significant and fits the data well. In other words, Discount and Free Shipping simultaneously have a significant effect on Online Purchase Decision.

Therefore, the model can be considered appropriate and reliable for explaining the purchasing behavior of Generation Z consumers in this study.

**Hipothesis Test**

Hypothesis testing was conducted using the t-test to examine the partial effects of each independent variable on Online Purchase Decision.

**Table 7.** t test

| Model | t-test | t table | Sig. | Info. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Discount | 1.501 | 1.655 | 0.136 | $H_1$ Rejected |
| Free Shipping | 13.449 | | 0.000 | $H_2$ Accepted |

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (2025)

The t-test was conducted to examine the partial effects of each independent variable on Online Purchase Decision. As presented in Table 7, the Discount variable has a t-value of 1.501, which is lower than the t-table value of 1.655, with a significance level of 0.136 (> 0.05). These results indicate that Discount does not have a statistically significant effect on Online Purchase Decision. Therefore, H1 is rejected. In contrast, the Free Shipping variable shows a t-value of 13.449 with a significance value of 0.000 (< 0.05). Since the calculated t-value exceeds the critical value and the significance level

is below 0.05, Free Shipping has a positive and statistically significant effect on Online Purchase Decision. Thus, H2 is accepted.

These findings confirm that Free Shipping is the dominant factor influencing online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers, whereas Discount does not significantly affect purchasing behavior in this study.

## Discussion

### The Effect of Discount on Online Purchase Decision

The findings indicate that Discount does not have a significant influence on Online Purchase Decision among Generation Z consumers. Although discounts are traditionally considered powerful monetary incentives, the results suggest that price reductions alone are insufficient to meaningfully drive purchasing behavior in this context. Within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, discounts function as external monetary stimuli designed to enhance perceived value and stimulate favorable internal evaluations. However, the absence of a significant effect suggests that the discount stimulus may not strongly activate the internal psychological processes (organism) necessary to generate a behavioral response (purchase decision). For Generation Z consumers, who are highly exposed to continuous online promotions, discounts may be perceived as routine marketing tactics rather than distinctive value propositions.

Previous studies have generally demonstrated that price promotions enhance perceived deal value and stimulate purchase intention (Grewal et al., 2011). Research also shows that consumers with high price sensitivity tend to respond positively to discounts (Lichtenstein et al., 2016). However, other studies suggest that frequent discounting can reduce promotional effectiveness and even weaken perceived product quality over time (DelVecchio et al., 2006; Palazon & Delgado-Ballester, 2013). In highly competitive digital marketplaces, consumers are constantly exposed to flash sales and promotional campaigns, which may reduce the novelty and persuasive power of discounts. These findings imply that, for Generation Z consumers, discounts may no longer serve as a strong differentiating stimulus capable of shaping purchasing decisions. Instead, they may be viewed as standard platform features rather than compelling incentives.

### The Effect of Free Shipping on Online Purchase Decision

In contrast, Free Shipping demonstrates a significant positive influence on Online Purchase Decision. This suggests that eliminating delivery costs plays a critical role in shaping purchasing behavior among Generation Z consumers. From the S-O-R perspective, free shipping functions as a cost-elimination stimulus that reduces perceived transactional barriers and enhances perceived economic fairness. Unlike discounts, which reduce product prices, free shipping removes an additional cost that consumers often mentally categorize as a loss (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The psychological impact of eliminating a perceived loss may be stronger than offering a price reduction.

Prior research supports this finding. Lewis et al. (2006) demonstrate that shipping incentives significantly increase purchase incidence in online retail contexts. Similarly, Hossain and Saini (2015) find that free shipping reduces perceived financial risk and strengthens purchase intention. More recent studies also highlight that delivery incentives and cost transparency are key determinants of online purchasing behavior,

particularly among younger consumers who prioritize convenience and efficiency (Ma et al., 2022).

For Generation Z, who value simplicity, cost transparency, and seamless digital experiences, free shipping appears to create a stronger internal evaluation of value compared to discounts. The removal of additional costs reduces transaction friction and enhances overall perceived benefit, thereby triggering a stronger behavioral response.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The findings contribute to the S-O-R literature by demonstrating that not all economic promotional stimuli exert equal behavioral effects in digital commerce settings. Although both discounts and free shipping are categorized as monetary incentives, their psychological mechanisms differ. Free shipping appears to generate stronger organism-level evaluations related to cost efficiency and fairness, leading to more decisive purchasing behavior.

From a managerial perspective, the results suggest that e-commerce platforms targeting Generation Z consumers should prioritize delivery cost elimination strategies rather than relying heavily on conventional discount campaigns. Investment in free shipping programs may generate greater behavioral impact and enhance competitive positioning in saturated digital markets.

## Conclusion

This study examined the effects of discounts and free shipping on online purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. The findings reveal that not all monetary promotional strategies exert equal influence on purchasing behavior in digital commerce environments. Specifically, discounts were found to have no significant impact on online purchase decisions. This suggests that price reductions alone may no longer serve as a strong stimulus for Generation Z consumers, who are highly accustomed to frequent promotional campaigns in online marketplaces. In highly competitive digital environments, discounts may be perceived as routine marketing tactics rather than distinctive value drivers. In contrast, free shipping demonstrated a significant positive influence on online purchase decisions. The elimination of delivery costs appears to reduce perceived transactional barriers and enhance perceived economic value, thereby encouraging stronger behavioral responses. These findings indicate that cost-elimination strategies may be more effective than traditional price reductions in influencing Generation Z consumers. Theoretically, this study contributes to the S-O-R literature by demonstrating that different economic stimuli generate varying behavioral responses in digital commerce contexts. Practically, the results suggest that e-commerce platforms targeting Generation Z consumers should prioritize free shipping programs over conventional discount strategies to enhance purchasing behavior. Overall, the study underscores the importance of understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying promotional effectiveness in the evolving digital marketplace.

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