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Digital engagement and healthcare service selection: Insights into young consumers decision-making in the digital era

Siwi Dyah Ratnasari[1,2*], Tita Hariyanti[2], Pardiman[3], Nevi Danila[4]

[1] Department of Management, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Malangkuçeçwara, Malang, Indonesia
[2] Master of Hospital Management Program, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia
[3] Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Islam Malang, Malang, Indonesia
[4] Department of Finance, College of Business Administration, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
*Corresponding Author(s) Email: siwiratna@gmail.com, siwiratna@stie-mce.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has fundamentally changed how young healthcare consumers select hospitals, shifting decision-making beyond clinical quality toward digitally mediated experiences. Despite the rapid digitalization of healthcare services, limited research explains how digital engagement and experiential value jointly shape hospital choice from a service marketing perspective. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study analyzed in-depth interviews with 11 young healthcare consumers in a medium-sized Indonesian city. Five determinants emerged: digital visibility, online interaction quality, facility comfort, patient reviews, and perceived emotional value. The findings demonstrate that digital touchpoints and experiential value play a central role in hospital choice. This study extends consumer behavior and service marketing literature by integrating digital engagement and emotional value into hospital choice behavior. Although the findings are context-specific, they offer strategic insights for healthcare organizations to strengthen competitiveness through digitally integrated, patient-centered marketing strategies that enhance engagement, trust, and long-term loyalty.

Keywords: Digital Transformation; Hospital Choice; Service Marketing; Consumer Behavior; Customer Experience; Young Healthcare Consumers

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Introduction

The digital transformation has had a significant impact on consumer behavior, including in the health sector, which has altered the ways by which consumers search for information, compare options, and make consumer purchases. Hospitals are no longer judged just on their clinical abilities, but also their digital presence, online interactions, service accessibility, and the overall customer experience. With the rapid transition of healthcare services towards technology, hospitals are under pressure to adopt digitally integrated, patient-centric approaches that not only satisfy the changing demands of consumers but also ensure their long-term competitiveness.

In the context of health care consumers, Generation Z (those born between the mid-90s and early 2010s) is a unique group as they have never known a time without the internet, social media, and instant access to information. They use digital tools to assess healthcare providers before deciding to use them, and they look for online reviews, social recommendations, service transparency, and digital responsiveness, among other qualities, in addition to what's traditionally considered (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Previous studies also indicate that this generation is high on digital health literacy and often uses online health information before accessing health care services (Priporas et al., 2017).

Previous research has revealed many factors that affect the decision to choose a hospital, such as digital marketing (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021; Rahayu et al., 2022; Vaz & Venkatesh, 2022), patient satisfaction (Tozour et al., 2021; Kolbe et al., 2021; Dyrbye et al., 2020), service quality (Nguyen et al., 2021; Altuntas & Kansu, 2020; Fatonah & Palupi, 2020; Akdere et al., 2018), online reputation (Zhang et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2024), and healthcare accessibility (Chen et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2021). But these determinants have been studied individually and thus a complete picture of hospital choice behavior has not been developed. Digital marketing research provides an understanding of how hospitals capture the attention of consumers, while studies on patient satisfaction and service quality have been mostly conducted at the end of the service. Similarly, research on online reviews, emotional experiences and social influence is traditionally done separately and there is little knowledge about how these non-medical factors combine in digitally transformed service environments, to influence the choice of hospital for young consumers of health care.

Theoretically, the evidence is fragmentary, and it points to the need for a more comprehensive explanation of hospital choice behavior. Little research exists that addresses how digital transformation generates initial awareness among healthcare providers, how

value is co-created in the digital interaction, and how non-medical service components collectively affect trust, preferences, and ultimate hospital choice. The combination of Digital Transformation Theory (DTT), Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), and Non-Medical Service Factors (NMSF) offers a more holistic approach to explaining hospital choice since the factors are interdependent and include digital engagement, service experiences, social validation, and emotional value. A pragmatic point is that many hospitals invest in digital technologies without fully comprehending how young healthcare consumers consider them at every stage of their decision-making process, thereby reducing the impact of digital marketing and patient engagement efforts.

This study, thus, proposes an integrated conceptual model to account for the concurrent effects of digital visibility, online interaction quality, facility comfort, patient reviews, and perceived emotional value on the choice of hospital among members of the generation Z. It is a qualitative phenomenological study that contributes to the literature of healthcare consumer behavior and service marketing by extending the existing understanding of hospital choice beyond the traditional clinical and service-quality paradigm. The results also offer strategic guidance for healthcare companies looking to boost competitiveness by implementing patient-centric marketing strategies that leverages digital integration to improve consumer engagement, trust, and long-term loyalty.

Literature Review

Digital Transformation and Consumer Behavior of Generation Z

The digital revolution has revolutionised how consumers, especially Gen Z, engage with healthcare services.The digital revolution has transformed the way customers engage with health services, particularly Generation Z. The Gen Z is known as the digital native, thus exhibiting unique behaviors such as being dependent on digital platforms, accessing information in real-time, and relying on interaction channels (Nagarajan, 2024). As revealed in the study of Jiao et al. (2023), digital technology and social media play a critical role in the formation of Gen Z's brand and service perception, which includes healthcare institutions as well. The research by Seyfi et al. (2024) also suggests that Gen Z believes the digital space is now the space of response, speed, customization and continuity, rather than of service, changing the conception of service expectations in this generation. Based on the literature review, however, previous studies focus on digital behaviors in general services and have not specifically analyzed the impact of these digital expectations when combined with the hospital choice decision.

A large number of publications have emerged, but there is still a large void of research. Previous studies have generally focused on non-medical aspects. For example, Priporas et al. (2017) are interested in digital marketing and online engagement, Wang et al. (2020) are interested in online reviews and reputation, and Tyrväinen et al. (2020) are interested in the service experience and physical environment. These results suggest that non-medical determinants are studied in isolation and this leads to disjointed understanding of the hospital choice behavior.

Furthermore, studies do not agree on a consistent and complete approach, as some highlight the importance of digital experience as a determinant, while others highlight emotional or environmental aspects. Furthermore, many of the studies on the patient population do not distinguish the characteristics of Generation Z and its behavior from previous generations (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). While these are qualities that are typically not directly discussed in healthcare research. Previous studies on digital health behaviour by Priporas et al. (2017) reveal that Generation Z is highly active in their use of online platforms as a source of health information, but relatively few studies have considered how digital factors interact with other factors, like cost, distance and physical facilities, when making a hospital choice.

Moreover, studies have shown that many hospitals are failing to meet the expectations of Gen Z in their digital services and marketing strategies, particularly in terms of responsiveness, transparency and user experience (Chang & Chang, 2023). Hence, research that investigates psychological (emotional), social, or technological issues all within one analytical framework is still scarce. The present study seeks to address this gap by using a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of these 'Generation Z', in order to understand the healthcare consumer behaviour in a contextual setting, in choosing hospital services.

Non-Clinical Factors Influencing Hospital Choice

Today's younger generations are increasingly focused on non-medical factors such as service experience, comfort in the facilities and the online reputation. Tyrväinen et al. (2020) proposed that customer experience is a significant part of customer loyalty as it has both emotional and physical aspects. According to Wang et al. (2020), today, the primary source of information for choosing healthcare providers is patient reviews and the online reputation of these providers, with Generation Z interested in transparency, credibility and peer validation. Ben-Aharon et al. (2020) also point to the importance of a single experience

digital user to improve user satisfaction for young patients. The vast majority of these studies are dedicated to non-medical factors in isolation, however, and do not consider the emotional experience, digital interaction and social influence in a holistic framework of hospital choice behaviour.

Generation Z's Digital Behavior in Hospital Selection

Due to the fast growth of digital technology, the way that consumers evaluate and select health services has significantly changed. The "always on" generation (also called Generation Z) are turning to social media, online reviews and digital health apps to get information before choosing a hospital (Priporas et al., 2017). Service value creation is based on the concept of Service-Dominant Logic (Peltier et al., 2020), which is a collaborative process and is realised in Ongoing interaction and Co-creation between service providers and users, including digitally. This view accentuates the notion that the value added in the hospital isn't merely about clinical results, but also about interactive digital experiences and perceived engagement. Therefore, online reputation and the digital experience are key elements that impact the preferences of, and loyalty to, hospital institutions by Generation Z. However, few empirical studies have been conducted on the practice of this co-creation process, in particular, in the context of the selection process of a hospital by Generation Z.

Generation Z's Perspective on Healthcare Selection

Unlike previous generations, Generation Z is more critical of services they receive, wants transparency, and wants meaningful personal experiences (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). In the healthcare sector, their assessments are not just based on clinical skills, but also encompass empathy, emotional resonance, social interaction, and the incorporation of digital services (Rana et al., 2025). Generation Z is a cohort with unique traits that set them apart from older generations, especially in their approach to digital technology and their expectations of service. Generally speaking, Generation Z can be considered digital natives, highly dependent on digital platforms, preferring immediate access to information and high engagement with social media (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Priporas et al., 2017; Smith & Anderson, 2020).

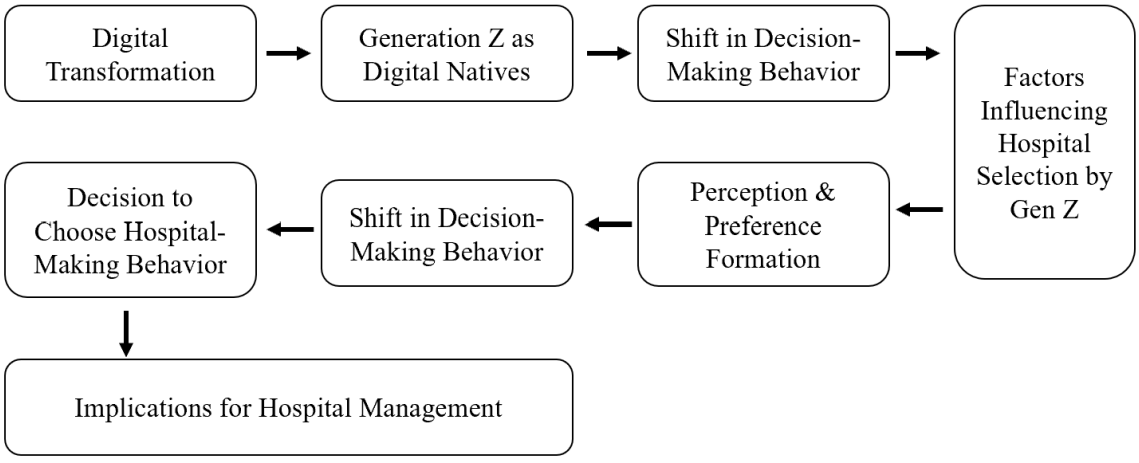
Recent research also indicates that Gen Z has a preference for personalized, responsive, and seamless digital experiences that can have a profound impact on their perceptions and decision-making in service settings, such as healthcare (Jiao et al., 2023; Nagarajan, 2024). These attributes also mean other expectations in the healthcare sector than the previous generation. Generation Z is known for using clinical care as one of their criteria to determine

the quality of a healthcare provider, as well as their digital experience, online reputation, transparency, and emotional engagement (Chang & Chang, 2023; Rana et al., 2025). In addition, digital interaction is also seen as a component of value co-creation between patients and health care providers, following the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) approach (Peltier et al., 2020). These viewpoints are brought together to create a conceptual framework that synthesizes the digital factors, emotional experience and social influence to provide a more complete, and theoretically stronger, explanation of hospital selection behavior among Gen Z.

As a crucial part of a plan to become more competitive and gain patient loyalty for future, hospitals need to understand Gen Z preferences and needs, which are crucial for patient care (Chang & Chang, 2023). In spite of these developments, the literature lacks a holistic and comprehensive analysis of non-medical determinants, considering psychological (emotional), social and digital ones at the same time, and thus this study is situated to address this gap.

Generation Z has unique consumption charactheristics such as wariness of service claims, demands for transparency, and a high value for authenticity and personalization (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). They are also digital natives and have a "digital native" expectation for a seamless digital experience during the service path. In healthcare, their assessment goes beyond just clinical skills, encompassing factors such as empathetic communication, digital accessibility, and online reputation, as well as the overall experience of the service (Rana et al., 2025). Therefore, it is crucial that healthcare providers learn about these changing tastes in order to boost their competitiveness in the healthcare sector and enhance consumer engagement and loyalty in the digital era (Chang & Chang, 2023).

Figure 1. Frame of Mind (Priporas et al. 2017; Francis & Hoefel 2018)



While multiple factors have been suggested as determinants of hospital choice, these have been studied mostly in isolation, thereby providing a disjointed picture of the decision-making process of young consumers in digitally transformed service environments. This study aims to fill this gap by constructing a holistic conceptual framework that captures the non-medical factors of the hospital choice of Gen-Z. The framework combines three complementary perspectives: Digital Transformation Theory (DTT), Non-Medical Service Factors (NMSF), and Service-Dominant Logic (SDL).

From the perspective of DTT, digital technologies have fundamentally reshaped how young consumers search for information, interact with healthcare providers, and evaluate hospital services. Consequently, digital visibility, online interactions, and social media engagement are conceptualized as the initial drivers that shape awareness and early service perceptions. SDL further explains that value is co-created through interactions between healthcare providers and consumers, suggesting that digital interactions contribute to perceived service value beyond clinical outcomes. Complementing these perspectives, NMSF emphasizes the importance of experiential attributes—including emotional comfort, perceived empathy, facility convenience, and online reputation—in influencing hospital choice. Within the proposed framework, emotional value mediates the relationship between digital experiences and consumer evaluations, while social influences, such as online reviews and peer recommendations, reinforce confidence and ultimately shape hospital selection decisions.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study. The framework starts with digital transformation, which has changed the healthcare sector through the use of digital technology for communication, information, and healthcare services. As Generation Z are digital natives, they are familiar with digital technology and often use online platforms in their daily lives. This condition has changed their decision-making behavior, where they prefer to search for information through digital channels rather than traditional sources. As a result, they form their perceptions and preferences based on information from hospital websites, social media, online reviews, and other digital platforms. These perceptions and preferences influence the factors they consider when choosing a hospital, such as digital visibility, online interaction, service quality, patient reviews, and emotional value. Finally, these factors affect their hospital selection decision and provide useful implications for hospital management in developing digital strategies that better meet the needs and expectations of young healthcare consumers.

Methods

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to understand and describe the experiences and meaning of young healthcare consumers regarding non-medical factors that affect their choices of hospitals under conditions of a digitally transformed healthcare system. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate because it seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences and how these experiences shape decision-making (Smith et al., 2021). This allows a detailed examination of the factors beyond clinical ones that influence hospital choice in the context of online interaction, emotional perception, and social influences.

This study was carried out at Batu City in East Java, Indonesia. Batu is a suitable research context because the health care sector in the city has been increasingly digitalized in delivering patient information, communication, and services (Sihidi et al., 2021; Triananda & Suharso, 2024) and because Batu has the characteristics of a medium-sized city in Indonesia that is undergoing digitalization in the health care sector (Nurkholilah, 2022; Binsar et al., 2026). Local policies that encourage cross-facility data reporting and digital communication channels also support this digital transformation (Wali Kota Batu, 2021).

In order to reach the objective of the research, the participants were selected by purposive sampling with criterion based sampling to find the individuals who have direct experience in the research. The eligible participants were the young healthcare consumers (aged 18–27 years) who had used the healthcare services of public or private hospitals in the last two years and who had taken an active role in the selection of the hospital they visited and were willing to share their experience of using those healthcare services through in-depth interviews. Eleven interviews were conducted and recruitment stopped after eleven interviews, at which point no new themes or meaningful conceptual insights were forthcoming, as thematic saturation had been reached. The participants were purposively selected to include a variety of socioeconomic status, hospital type and rate of hospital use. The final sample included six females and five males aged 20-28 years with varied socioeconomic status who have used public and private hospitals in the last 2 years. The demographic data of the 11 participants in this study is shown in Table 1. The majority of participants had visited hospitals 2-5 times, which meant that they had enough experience to be able to reflect on their hospital selection process. The study included a relatively homogeneous educational group, as all participants had a bachelor's degree, and it captured differences in hospital utilisation and experiences with services. These characteristics elucidate why these subjects were chosen for the study to-

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Hospital Type	Freq. of Hospital Use (Past 2 Years)
P1	24	Female	Corporate Worker	Private	3
P2	22	Female	College Student	Public	2
P3	26	Male	Corporate Worker	Private	4
P4	21	Female	Entrepreneur	Private	2
P5	25	Male	School Educator	Private	3
P6	23	Female	Corporate Worker	Public	5
P7	28	Male	Entrepreneur	Private	4
P8	20	Male	Corporate Worker	Public	2
P9	24	Female	Corporate Worker	Private	3
P10	27	Male	Public Servant	Public	4
P11	22	Female	Entrepreneur	Private	2

investigate the actual experiences of young healthcare consumers in relation to non-medical factors affecting hospital choice in the digital era.

The data that were gathered was done so using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with an interview guide that was created based on literature on healthcare consumer behavior, digital transformation, and non-medical determinants of hospital choice. The guide comprised of open-ended, general questions that focused on the experience, perception and considerations that the participants had when choosing hospitals, with some flexibility to ask probing and follow up questions. Before data collection, the interview guide was checked by two researchers with experience in qualitative research in healthcare and pilot tested with two young consumers of healthcare to ensure the questions were clear, relevant and logically sequenced.

Face-to-face interviews were carried out in the period of July–August 2025, with each interview session lasting around 45–60 minutes. It was a completely voluntary activity. Prior to the interviews, participants were told about the aims of the study, that they could decline or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. All participants gave written informed consent before the data were collected. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised and stored securely for analysis with the permission of the participants.

Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The analysis started by repeated reading of the interview transcripts to get familiarized with the data, then coded the meaningful units of meaning inducively. Descriptive codes were created to help organize the data in NVivo and then further organized under candidate themes through an

iterative process of comparison across the participants' stories. Candidate themes were then analyzed, elaborated, specified, and labeled for conceptual consistency and to accurately describe participants' experiences. Once the themes were identified, it became possible to see how they interrelated with one another to develop a comprehensive explanation of hospital choice of young healthcare consumers. The conceptual framework was used to guide the development of the interview guide, but the analysis was largely inductive and themes were identified from the participants' responses and subsequently interpreted using Digital Transformation Theory (DTT), Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), and Non-Medical Service Factors (NMSF). Data was organised and retrieved using NVivo software throughout the analysis process and all coding decisions and thematic interpretations were left to the researchers.

Post coding, the researchers found that there were commonalities of meaning among the participants' stories and that some codes were similar and could be grouped together into themes, which is an iterative process (Table 2). Relationships between codes, narrative context, and consistency with the theoretical perspective used in the study (Kitson et al., 2013) were taken into account when developing themes. Repeated words, meanings and experiences mentioned by participants were coded and then clustered into higher order themes that identified the major non-medical factors affecting hospital choice. Coding was used to systematically organise and categorise the qualitative data and to compare between participants, and to develop conceptually coherent themes.

Reflexivity was upheld throughout the study as qualitative research is interpretive. The main researcher has a background in the management of a hospital which could affect how participants' experiences are interpreted. To reduce the possibility of bias, a reflexive journal and analytical memos were kept, and interpretations were constantly checked against the original interview transcripts.

The credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (McGill et al., 2023) were used to determine trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking and iterative analysis of the interview data helped enhance credibility by allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of researchers' interpretations. Detailed description of the research context, participant characteristics and data collection procedures were provided to support transferability. To ensure transparency and methodological consistency through the research process, a detailed audit trail was kept to document methodological decisions, development of coding, refinement of themes and analytical reflections.

Table 2. Theming and Coding

Theme	Code	Description
Hospital Digital Visibility	DV_Active	The hospital is active on social media and websites.
	DV_Trusted	Digital information increases trust.
	DV_Accessible	Hospitals are easy to find on digital platforms.
Quality of Online Interaction	OIQ_Responsive	Quick and informative response from digital services
	OIQ_UserFriendly	Digital services are easy to use and friendly.
	OIQ_Alternative Seeking	Switch to another hospital if digital services are slow.
Facility Comfort	FC_Comfort	Comfortable and supportive physical facilities.
	FC_Cleanliness	Cleanliness is an important factor.
	FC_Influence Decision	Facilities influence decisions even though digital services are important.
Other Patient Reviews	PR_Positive	Positive reviews increase trust.
	PR_Negative Avoid	Avoid hospitals with negative reviews.
	PR_Influence	Reviews are a key factor in consideration.
Perception of Emotional Value	EV_Social Support	Family and friend recommendations influence decisions.
	EV_Comfort	Services that make patients feel valued and comfortable.
	EV_Loyalty	Emotional values that build loyalty and recommendations.

Results and Discussion

This thematic analysis was able to successfully identify five themes: digital visibility, online interaction quality, facility comfort, patient reviews, and emotional value perception. These are the insights that outline the non-medical factors that drive hospital choice for young health consumers in today's digital challenges.

Theme 1: Hospital Digital Visibility

One of the key factors that stood out as a driver of hospital choice for young health consumers was digital visibility. The majority of the participants said that they started their search for hospitals using Google, official websites and social media platforms before any healthcare decision. Participants always linked an active and informative digital presence with professionalism and credibility, as shown in Table 3. P1, P3, P5, P6 and P11 said that because of the updated websites and informative social media content, videos and easy access to information online, they felt more confident in the hospital before having any direct

contact. P2 and P10, meanwhile, mentioned that through social media interactions, online reviews, and hospitals' interactions with patients, they were able to verify the credibility and quality of healthcare providers. P4 and P7, however, reported that hospitals that were not easily accessible on Google or social media and had limited digital visibility were often not considered. Likewise, P8 and P9 viewed digital visibility as the first filter, stating that if the hospital had social media activity, they were more likely to be noticed than those with just a static website.

The results show that digital visibility serves as the first point of call when it comes to choosing a hospital for young health consumers. Hospitals with up-to-date websites, active social media accounts, and information available online were preferred by participants as these digital assets helped alleviate uncertainty and build trust prior to any direct contact. Digital pressences were not just a means of promotion; they were the determinant factor for-

Table 3. Participants' Perceptions of Hospital Digital Visibility

Questions	Participants	Answers
How you first find out which hospital you chose?	P1	I searched on Google and checked the hospital's Instagram. If their account is active and updated, I believe it.
	P2	My friend told me about it on social media and I researched the website and online reviews.
	P3	The official website and social media that are regularly updated make me feel that the hospital is professional.
	P4	If the hospital isn't on one of the digital platforms, I hesitate and select the one that's easy to find.
	P5	Videos and testimonials on social media make me more confident of the hospital.
	P6	I initially try to determine whether the hospital has interesting and informative content on the internet before deciding.
	P7	If I cannot find the hospital on Google or Instagram, I simply skip it.
	P8	Digital visibility is my first priority particularly in an all-digital world.
	P9	I find a lot of hospitals through a website, but those that are active in the social media tend to be the ones that grab my attention.
	P10	I have been reading the hospital's reviews and social media accounts to observe their service towards patients.
	P11	The website was informative and easy to understand, which helped me to feel confident in my choice of the hospital.

participants to assess a hospital's credibility, responsiveness, and professionalism. In contrast, hospitals that weren't as digital were deemed less reliable and often eliminated from the list.

This aligns with the results of Jiao et al. (2023) and Rahim et al. (2021) that digital visibility has a major impact on consumers' perceptions of healthcare institutions, enhancing institutional credibility and organizational image. Similarly, Wataya and Shaw (2022) discovered that young consumers prefer to engage with an organization that has a strong digital footprint, as this indicates that they are well regarded as a service provider and are professional. The current results also align with Darzi et al., (2023) and Ford et al., (2013) who suggested that digital engagement has a positive impact on consumer perceptions of health care quality prior to health care use.

This study not only validates existing literature on healthcare consumers' behavior but also adds to the body of knowledge by showing that the digital visibility is not just an informational tool, but the first step to building trust. In line with the Digital Transformation Theory (DTT), the decision process for selecting a hospital is a technology mediated process, where consumers can assess healthcare providers using digital touchpoints before making any face-to-face interaction. The discovery implies that trust building starts long before a patient walks through the door of your hospital, so it is important to have a credible, informative and consistently managed digital presence.

Hospitals should think of digital visibility as a strategic marketing capability instead of a complementary communication tool from a managerial standpoint. Having updated websites, active social media accounts, accurate online information and consistent digital branding can enhance institutional credibility, boost consumer trust, and increase the chances of being part of the consumer's first consideration set when choosing a hospital.

Theme 2: Quality of Online Interaction

Quality of online interaction emerged as another important factor influencing hospital selection among young healthcare consumers. Participants consistently described responsive, informative, and friendly communication through digital channels, particularly social media, virtual chat, and online consultations, as shaping their initial perceptions of a hospital. Generally, as reported in Table 4, promptness and clarity of communication were linked to professionalism, reliability and patient centred service. P1, P4, P7, P8 and P11 indicated that having prompt responses and correct information via online chat boosted their confidence prior to going to the hospital. On the other hand, P2, P5, P9 and P10 mentioned that they could feel valued, respected and cared for through friendly communication even though they

only met online. Moreover, P3 and P6 described how consultations online could give them the initial information and would help to build trust in the hospital before visiting the site for treatment.

The results indicate that the online interaction is more than just a communication channel; it is an essential service encounter that influences consumer service quality perceptions prior to the actual in-person interaction. Responsive digital communication helped to reduce uncertainty by providing timely information and friendly, supportive interactions helped to build trust and increase participants' confidence in their hospital choice. On the other hand, the participants said that a slower response time, complex digital systems or unclear information reduced trust and made them look for other healthcare providers. These findings show that the quality of digital communication has an impact on the cognitive assessment and emotional reassurance in the selection of hospital.

Table 4. Participants' Perceptions of Quality of Online Interaction

Questions	Participants	Answers
How has your experience been with using digital services such as online chat?	P1	When I asked through the chat on the hospital's website, they replied quickly and gave clear information. It made me feel confident in choosing the hospital.
	P2	The chat service is friendly and helpful, so I feel noticed even online.
	P3	Online chat is important to me, especially if there is an initial consultation before going to the hospital.
	P4	I am happy with the fast response digital service, because I need info right away.
	P5	The chat service is easy to use, and the staff is friendly, so I am comfortable.
	P6	If the online consultation goes smoothly, I will trust the hospital's services more.
	P7	The responsive and clear chat really helped me to make decisions.
	P8	The responsive and clear chat really helped me to make decisions
	P9	The quick response in the chat made me feel appreciated and cared for.
	P10	The quick response on social media made me feel appreciated as a patient.
	P11	My experience with the online chat was good because the staff answered my questions quickly and clearly.

This aligns with Arizo-Luque et al. (2022), who found that digital responsiveness is an important factor to enhance healthcare users' experiences and foster sustained engagement from youthful consumers. Likewise, Peltier et al. (2020) revealed that responsiveness and ease of digital access are key indicators that significantly increase patient satisfaction and loyalty, and Sanchez et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of user-friendly digital services in optimizing patient engagement during the healthcare delivery process. This literature is extended by the present findings in that digital responsiveness also impacts the consumer even before they become a patient, and that it decreases uncertainties when choosing a hospital and increases initial trust.

These results indicate, from a Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) point of view, that value creation is initiated through digital interaction and not just during clinical contact. Through responsive communication, hospitals and prospective patients can be co-creators of value by sharing information, minimizing perceived risk, and building trust prior to the delivery of care. Thus, a hospital must not only see digital communication as a support service for administration but as a strategic touchpoint for service that can boost consumer engagement, build organizational credibility, and ultimately drive long-term competitive advantage in a more digital healthcare markets.

Theme 3: Facility Comfort

While digital factors were significant in hospital choice, participants repeatedly stated that physical facilities were also a factor in their decision. Participants identified cleanliness, comfortable waiting areas, modern facilities, and patient-friendly environments as signs of hospital quality and professionalism, as shown in Table 5. P1, P2, P5, P6 and P8 mentioned that the cleanliness and comfortable waiting areas relieved their anxiety and provided them a feeling of comfort before treatment. In the meantime, P3 and P4 gave an explanation on the modern facilities and the patient oriented infrastructure that reflected the hospital's commitment to the provision of high quality healthcare services. P7 and P9 also linked feeling comfortable with feeling appreciated, safe and confident when visiting hospital. By contrast, P10 and P11 said that although positive digital impressions can be made, the lack of physical facilities could be the deciding factor and make them reconsider their choice of hospital.

The results suggest that both digital and physical experiences are complementary in the selection of the hospital. Although digital platforms help to build awareness and trust, the hospital's physical environment reinforces or undermines the expectations set by the digital

experience at the point of service. Digital transformation does not seem to be a substitute for the traditional service attributes, but rather serves as a catalyst for consumers' expectations for offline service quality. Therefore, participants had a high expectation of consistency between the image of the hospital that they saw online and the actual experience of visiting the hospital.

The results are in line with the results of DiMattio and Hudacek (2020) and Sasongko (2018) which showed that good quality of healthcare facilities positively affected patients' perceptions and evaluations of services. Similarly, Al-Damen (2017) identified physical service environment as an important factor of perceived healthcare quality and Thinley (2021) stated that comfortable and supportive healthcare environments boost patients' confidence and their overall evaluation of the healthcare services. The present study builds upon these findings by demonstrating that physical facilities are appraised in the context of the digital presence of hospitals, and not as stand-alone attributes of services. The first expectations are formed when young people are interacting with digital platforms and then their physical environment will validate whether their expectations are met.

Table 5. Participants' Perceptions of Comfortable Physical Facilities

Questions	Participants	Answers
How important are the hospital's physical facilities in your decision?	P1	Even though digital is important, I still see physical facilities, especially cleanliness and waiting rooms.
	P2	Comfortable facilities make me calmer when I receive treatment.
	P3	I also noticed how hospitals provide facilities that make it easier for patients.
	P4	Modern and clean facilities are an added value that is quite influential.
	P5	If the waiting room is comfortable, I don't feel stressed while waiting for my turn.
	P6	I checked the waiting room and its cleanliness, which made me calmer.
	P7	The comfortable facilities made me feel appreciated and wanted to come back.
	P8	While digital services are important, physical comfort is still a consideration for me.
	P9	Good facilities make me more confident and feel safe.
	P10	If the physical facilities are not comfortable, I might look for another hospital.
	P11	Digital presence matters, but poor facilities evoke hesitation.

For a service marketer, this means that a successful digital transformation means there has to be consistency between what people are told online and what is provided offline. While Digital Transformation Theory provides a framework for the effect of digital technologies on consumers' first impression, the results also reveal that maintaining consumers' trust is dependent on the hospital's capacity to turn the digital promises into positive experiences in the physical world. Therefore, hospitals need to combine digitally enabled services with clean, comfortable, and patient-friendly facilities to provide a seamless healthcare journey, fostering trust, satisfaction, and long-term loyalty among young healthcare consumers.

Theme 4: Other Patient Reviews

Patient reviews were also a key factor in influencing hospital choice among young health care consumers. There was an unanimous answer to always check online reviews and testimonials before making a decision to visit a hospital. Participants reported patient generated reviews to be a more authentic and more trusted source of information than institutional promotional literature, as shown in Table 6. For instance, P1 said the other patients' experiences were a reflection of how it is really in the hospital and P2 and P9 said they routinely read Google reviews and comments online before making a decision. In a similar manner, P3 and P10 said that good reviews and good ratings boosted their trust in a hospital, while P4, P7 and P8 said they would avoid a hospital that received many complaints or had serious bad ratings. The participants also called for comprehensive and transparent reviews to enable them to make comparisons between health care providers and minimize uncertainty when making appointments. For example, P5 noted that patient feedback helped them to compare hospitals, P6 said that detailed reviews seemed more realistic and P11 said that reading reviews prior to making an appointment helped to prevent disappointment. All these answers suggest that online reviews serve as a significant social validation process and influence trust and perceived risk in choosing a hospital. The results indicate that besides information sharing, patient reviews can also influence consumer expectations and trust prior to engaging with healthcare providers. Positive comments boosted participants' confidence and drove them to choose to go to the hospital, while negative comments led to avoidance behaviour and alternative provider choice. Participants wanted more authentic experiences of others rather than just information published by hospitals as these were seen as more objective and credible. Thus, online reviews emerged as a significant tool to assess hospital quality and lessen uncertainty in the decision making process.

Table 6. Participants' Perceptions of Other Patient Reviews

Questions	Participants	Answers
How much influence do other patient reviews have on your decisions?	P1	I believe in other people's experiences because they are a reflection of the quality of the hospital.
	P2	I always read reviews on Google and forums before buying.
	P3	Many give good ratings and positive comments, I believe.
	P4	Negative reviews make me rethink.
	P5	Testimonials from other patients are helpful to compare hospitals.
	P6	Honest and detailed review, I really appreciate.
	P7	If there are a lot of complaints, I will definitely look for other options.
	P8	If there is a serious complaint, I look for another alternative.
	P9	I checked the reviews and comments before deciding.
	P10	Reviews are the main consideration for me.
	P11	Read reviews before booking an appointment to avoid disappointment.

This aligns with the study by Macheka et al. (2024), which indicated that online reviews are a key factor in healthcare decision-making for young consumers. Likewise, Jiao et al. (2023) discovered that patient-generated reviews are regarded as more trustworthy than institutional marketing as they represent real patient experiences. Ostherr et al. (2017) also found that younger consumers are particularly susceptible to peer-generated content when assessing healthcare services, and Grotte et al. (2024) found that social proof via online reviews serves as a means of boosting the credibility and reputation of healthcare organizations. The present findings add to this literature by showing that patient reviews are a link between the digital visibility and consumers' actual hospital choice, creating a reinforcement or disinhibition of the trust provided by hospitals' own digital messages.

Patient reviews are a strategic digital asset from a service marketing point of view as they influence the organisation's reputation and patients' trust before service is provided. In addition to Digital Transformation Theory findings, the results prove that digital healthcare decisions are not only made on information created by hospitals, but also on user-generated content that corroborates hospital claims. Thus, hospital managers should pay attention to online reviews, promote positive reviews from their patients, and deal with negative reviews professionally to enhance their credibility, help build consumer confidence and ensure sustainable patient acquisition.

Theme 5: Perception of Emotional Value

Finally, perceived emotional value proved to be a factor affecting hospital choice and future loyalty from young health care consumers. Participants repeatedly described how important it was to feel comfortable, appreciated, respected and emotionally safe during healthcare services as well as being well treated medically. Emotional experiences were very much associated with family and friends who were trusted sources of reassurance prior to the choice of hospital as shown in Table 6. For instance, P1 and P4 cited that having a family member who had undergone treatment previously and recommended the hospital had a significant impact on the choice of hospital. Likewise, P7 highlighted the relevance of recommendations from friends who have had previous healthcare experiences. Some respondents also mentioned the emotional comfort as a factor in their choice of hospital. P2, P5 and P10 said that it helped them to feel comfortable, appreciated and emotionally secure, which made them more likely to return to hospital, and P6, P8 and P9 said they felt more confident in the hospital as a result of warm interactions, sincere care and friendly communication. In addition, P3 highlighted that the emotional comfort was more important than the physical surroundings and P11 suggested that good emotional experiences would encourage them to recommend the hospital to others. These responses, when combined, indicate that emotional value is not just about patient satisfaction; it's about fostering trust, encouraging repeat visits, and driving positive word-of-mouth.

Results show that perceived emotional value is the ultimate outcome of consumers' health care experiences, encompassing the digital, physical and social factors that are merged into emotional bonding. Emotional value is not a stand-alone factor, but rather is an overall assessment of the healthcare experience, influencing decisions about hospital choice and future behaviors. Positive emotional experiences boosted participants' confidence in treatment as well as their willingness to return to the hospital and recommend it to others. These findings indicate that emotional value can turn functional healthcare experiences into long-term patient–provider relationships.

This aligns with the results of Nguyen et al., (2020), which indicated that emotional experiences are a key influence on consumer decision making and loyalty. Similarly, Vargo and Lusch (2008) made an argument in their work Service-Dominant Logic that value is not just in the service, but it is co-created between the service provider and the service consumer. The current results also reinforce this view as it highlights that respectful communication, empathy, a sense of caring and emotional reassurance add value to consumers' perception,

beyond merely clinical outcomes. The study also supports the findings of Carmo et al. (2022), which indicated that emotional experiences lead to enduring behavioral reactions, and Nembhard et al. (2023), which emphasized the role of empathetic healthcare encounters in patient loyalty. Building on these studies, the current results showed that perceived emotional value is the result of the entire hospital selection process and combines digital visibility, online interaction, facility comfort and patient reviews into a holistic emotional assessment to ultimately guide loyalty and advocacy.

Perceived emotional value is the ultimate step in the process of hospital choice, and it turns positive healthcare experiences into trust, loyalty and consumer advocacy from a service marketing point of view. Digital technologies enable access to information and interaction, but it is emotionally significant experiences that make patients feel respected, valued, and truly cared for that facilitate long-term relationships. Hospitals should thus supplement the efforts of digital transformation with an empathetic, patient-centred approach to service delivery, which can help build emotional connections, drive repeat visits and stimulate positive word-of-mouth among young healthcare consumers.

Table 6. Participants' Perceptions of Emotional Value

Questions	Participants	Answers
How do emotional experiences and family/friends' recommendations influence your decisions?	P1	I take the advice of families who have treated their very much.
	P2	If I felt comfortable and appreciated, I would have chosen that hospital again.
	P3	Trust and comfort are important, not just about facilities.
	P4	The advice of a family who has been treated has helped me a lot.
	P5	If I feel comfortable and appreciated, I will definitely choose that hospital again.
	P6	The warm and personal interaction made me feel appreciated.
	P7	I also consider recommendations from friends who have used the service.
	P8	My emotions are linked to sincere service and care.
	P9	I am looking for a hospital that is not only professional but also friendly.
	P10	Feeling comfortable and emotionally secure makes me loyal.
	P11	I recommend the service that makes me feel appreciated.

Integrated Discussion and Implications

The results from this study show that when young healthcare consumers are making their decisions on which hospital to choose, it is not only medical or logistical factors that affect them, but also their digital experiences, emotional perceptions and social validation along the way. The five themes—digital visibility, quality of online interaction, facility comfort, patient reviews and perceived emotional value—show that the choice of hospital is a chain of events. Digital visibility generates initial awareness and trust, online interaction generates engagement and confidence, physical facilities validates or negates expectations, patient reviews provides social validation and perceived emotional value creates loyalty and positive WOM. The results indicate that the youth healthcare consumers will choose healthcare providers that provide a technology enabled service as well as being empathetic and patient oriented.

The present study adds to the literature of healthcare marketing by integrating digital marketing, experiential marketing, and healthcare service quality in a single model to gain a better understanding of how young healthcare consumers choose their hospitals. Trust and loyalty are built through a mix of digital visibility, online communication, physical service environments, social validation and emotional experiences, whereas previous studies have targeted one of these elements, clinical quality and/or accessibility. This comprehensive perspective highlights the interconnectedness of digital presence as a cornerstone for fostering trust, engaging patients online as a means to strengthen that bond, the significance of physical environments in meeting patient expectations, the impact of patient reviews on credibility, and the emotional value of creating lasting loyalty and patient advocacy.

The findings from the managerial point of view suggest that patient-centredness and digital connectedness should be the paradigm shift in health care service delivery in hospitals. They should work to enhance their online presence through their active official websites and social media, communicate with patients in an empathetic way in the online space, ensure that their offline locations are clean and comfortable, actively manage their online reviews and improve the credibility of the institution and provide services in an empathetic way and create meaningful emotional experiences. These non-medical factors can be emphasized to enhance patient satisfaction, foster emotional connections, and encourage repeat visits and positive referrals. Positive emotional experiences foster brand advocacy and sharing them on digital platforms boosts the reputation of hospitals among young healthcare consumers, as proposed by Shimul and Faroque (2025) and Liaquat et al. (2025).

Conclusion and Suggestion

In this study a phenomenological approach was used to examine the non-medical factors affecting hospital choice among young healthcare consumers in the digital context. The findings show that the choice of a hospital involves a multifaceted process, with five interrelated factors: digital visibility, quality of online communication, comfort in hospital, patient reviews, and emotional value. These factors combine and influence young healthcare consumers' perception of hospitals, development of trust in healthcare institutions and eventual loyalty. Thus the findings respond to a crucial gap in the healthcare marketing literature by demonstrating that hospital choice is not limited to the traditional aspects of clinical quality and accessibility but also encompasses digital journeys, social validation, and emotional connections throughout the consumer journey.

The study also contributes to the literature in the healthcare marketing area by combining the perspectives of digital marketing, experiential marketing, and health care service quality to help explain how young healthcare consumers choose a healthcare service. The findings show that digital visibility creates the first impression of trust, an online interaction gives that impression, physical facilities create service expectations, patient reviews lend credibility, and the emotional value experienced in the different situations results in loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. From a practical perspective, when building a hospital's online reputation, it is crucial to focus on a patient-centric, digitally connected approach, and ensure that it is actively engaging with patients online, maintaining a positive online presence, and providing empathetic healthcare experiences, which will foster long-term patient relationships.

However, there are some drawbacks to these contributions. Firstly, only 11 participants were involved in this study. While this is a good number for phenomenological research and is adequate for thematic saturation, the results may not be representative of all young healthcare consumers' experiences. Second, the study was carried out in Batu City, Indonesia, and results might not apply to other areas where demographic characteristics and/or the extent of digitization of health services differ. Finally, since it is a qualitative study, it does not give statistically generalizable results and gives information that is specific to the context.

Future studies are required to replicate and expand the current study to larger and more varied samples in other geographic areas. Finally, quantitative or mixed-methods research might be conducted to explore the relationships between the five factors listed and to rank the factors by their importance in the choice of hospital. Comparative studies between generations and urban-rural areas might also be useful to gain insight into the broader

behaviour of healthcare consumers. Future studies could explore the impact of new digital health technologies like AI systems, telemedicine, and digital engagement platforms on hospital choice and the patient experience in the digital health landscape.

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Author Contributions*

Siwi Dyah Ratnasari	:	WOD, WRE, CCP, MTD, INV, ANL
Tita Hariyanti	:	WRE, VLD, SPV, PRF
Pardiman	:	WRE, INV, RES, FUN
Nevi Danila	:	SFT, DAC, RES, VIZ, ANL

*) WOD: Writing Original Draft, WRE: Writing Review Editing, CCP: Conceptualization, MTD: Methodology, SFT: Software, VLD: Validation, ANL: Formal Analysis, INV: Investigation, RES: Resources, DAC: Data Curation, VIZ: Visualization, SPV: Supervision, ADM: Project Administration, FUN: Funding, PRF: Proofreading, ALL: Contributions in All Categories

Conflict of Interest / Competing Interests

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Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because no sensitive personal data were collected.

Disclosure The Use of AI Technologies

During the preparation of this work; the author(s) used artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools for language editing; translation; and text refinement. After using these tools; the author(s) carefully reviewed; revised; and verified the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the accuracy; integrity; and final content of the publication.