

Why we buy, how we feel: applying phenomenology to consumer research

Journal of Trade
Science

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61

Abstract

Purpose – This research explores how phenomenology can enrich consumer research as a philosophical and methodological approach by illuminating the emotional, symbolic and experiential dimensions of consumer behavior that are often overlooked in traditional models. It advocates for a paradigm shift that deepens understanding of how consumers feel, interpret and engage with brands in increasingly complex markets.

Design/methodology/approach – The research adopts a conceptual design rooted in classical phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty), synthesizing theoretical constructs with a methodological framework for consumer research. It integrates intentionality, embodiment, temporality and reflexivity into a structured model that can guide qualitative inquiries into consumer lived experiences.

Findings – The research identifies phenomenology's unique ability to capture subjective consumer realities, such as emotional resonance, brand symbolism and sensory experiences. It proposes its practical application in developing context-sensitive, emotionally attuned marketing strategies. These insights are particularly relevant for emerging markets, where culture and context profoundly shape consumer motivations.

Originality/value – This research introduces a rigorously structured yet flexible framework for applying phenomenology in consumer research. It contributes to the scholarly discourse on qualitative marketing methodologies and offers marketers practical pathways to foster authentic, emotion-driven consumer engagement rooted in lived experience, especially in developing regions.

Keywords Phenomenology, Consumer research, Qualitative methodology, Marketing theory, Lived experience, Emotional engagement

Paper type Research article

Received 8 June 2025
Revised 31 August 2025
16 October 2025
Accepted 10 November 2025

1. Introduction

Phenomenology, a well-established philosophical framework, offers a unique lens for understanding human experiences by focusing on the meanings and essence that individuals attribute to them. Originating from the works of Edmund Husserl (1931) and further developed by Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), phenomenology emphasizes the subjective lived experiences that shape perceptions, actions, and decisions. In consumer research, phenomenology has proven invaluable for exploring the intricate and multifaceted nature of consumer behavior (Briegel and Müller, 2025). It provides a qualitative approach to delve into consumers' emotional, sensory, and often subconscious responses to products and services (Gallagher, 2022). For example, phenomenological inquiry can reveal how the sensory ritual of unboxing a luxury product influences brand perception or how the ambiance of a retail space shapes consumer satisfaction and loyalty. These insights extend beyond numerical patterns and statistics, providing more nuanced and comprehensive understandings that are critical for designing emotionally resonant marketing strategies and consumer experiences (Inanc and Kozak, 2021).

Despite these strengths, the potential of phenomenology in consumer research remains underexplored and inconsistently applied. Foundational interpretive works highlighted experiential consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), the role of possessions in identity (Belk, 1988), and methodological debates on phenomenological inquiry (Goulding, 1999,



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Journal of Trade Science
Vol. 14 No. 1, 2026
pp. 61-84
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2755-3957
p-ISSN: 2815-5793
DOI 10.1108/JTS-06-2025-0029

2005). Similarly, Consumer Culture Theory scholarship has recognized the value of phenomenology in contextualizing meaning in consumption practices (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). More recent works (Thompson *et al.*, 1989; Gabbott and Hogg, 2016; Aspers and Le Grand, 2024) have reinforced the importance of experiential and contextual approaches. However, these contributions have been mainly descriptive, context-specific, and rarely consolidated into a systematic methodological framework. As a result, mainstream consumer research continues to be dominated by quantitative approaches, which, although valuable for identifying trends, often overlook the embodied, affective, and contextual dimensions of consumer decision-making that phenomenology is uniquely positioned to illuminate (Dengen, 2025). This imbalance underscores the need to re-engage with phenomenology to provide richer, more human-centered insights into consumer behavior.

The methodological challenges of phenomenology further exacerbate its limited adoption. Scholars have noted the persistent difficulty of operationalizing phenomenological principles such as bracketing and reflexivity in empirical contexts (Moustakas, 1994; Wojnar and Swanson, 2007; Giorgi, 2009). Concerns regarding rigor, subjectivity, and replicability continue to pose significant barriers, resulting in studies that reference phenomenology but lack the methodological depth necessary to realize its full potential (Kaushik, 2024). These challenges point to the need for a comprehensive framework that not only clarifies the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology but also demonstrates how its principles can be systematically and rigorously applied in consumer research.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to pursue three interrelated objectives. First, it critically examines the potential and limitations of phenomenology in consumer research by reviewing its philosophical foundations and prior applications. Second, it develops and presents a structured methodological framework that systematizes the core principles of phenomenology—intentionality, embodiment, temporality, and reflexivity—for rigorous application in consumer studies. Third, it demonstrates how this framework can enrich understanding of consumer experiences while offering practical guidance for marketing scholars and practitioners (Cheeli, 2024).

Taken together, these objectives are grounded in the recognition that traditional approaches to consumer research are insufficient for capturing the complexities of contemporary behavior. As consumers increasingly seek experiences that resonate with their values, identities, and emotions, businesses must adopt methodologies that can illuminate these dimensions. Phenomenology, with its focus on subjective experience and contextual meaning, provides a distinctive approach to addressing this need. Through proposing a structured methodological framework, this study ensures that phenomenological insights can be translated into actionable strategies for both academics and practitioners (Grace, 2021). More broadly, it advocates for a shift in how consumer research is approached—emphasizing empathy, reflexivity, and depth in understanding consumers. Through integrating phenomenological insights into marketing practice, businesses can foster deeper emotional connections, enhance satisfaction, and cultivate stronger brand loyalty. These insights are critical for achieving sustainable consumer engagement in an increasingly competitive and diverse marketplace, while also advancing the role of phenomenology as a vital contributor to qualitative marketing research (Inanc and Kozak, 2021).

2. Literature review

2.1 Background of phenomenology

The background of phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical inquiries initiated by Edmund Husserl (1931), offers a rich tapestry of intellectual pursuit aimed at dissecting the layers of human consciousness and experience. Husserl's work, primarily focused on exploring phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness, sought to establish a rigorous scientific methodology for examining the structures of experience. His concept of "intentionality," the idea that consciousness is always about something, introduced a

fundamental shift in understanding perception, thought, and the essence of experiences. This notion underscores the relational aspect of human consciousness, positing that our perception and interpretation of phenomena always mediate our understanding of the world (Ferrarello and Hadjioannou, 2024).

Building upon Husserl's foundational ideas, phenomenology evolved through the contributions of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1962), Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962, and Jean-Paul Sartre (1992), each adding new layers of complexity and insight to the discipline. Heidegger, diverging from Husserl's emphasis on consciousness, introduced the concept of "Dasein," which highlights the existential aspects of being and situates human existence within the context of the world. His work extended phenomenology beyond the confines of individual consciousness to encompass the ontological conditions of Being, thereby expanding the scope of phenomenological inquiry to include the existential dimensions of human life (Gallagher, 2022).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty further advanced the field by emphasizing the importance of perception and the embodiment of consciousness. His exploration of the "lived body" as the primary site of experiencing the world challenged traditional dualities of mind and body, suggesting that our bodily engagement with the world is fundamental to the constitution of experience. Merleau-Ponty's focus on embodiment illuminated how physical interaction with the environment shapes our perceptions, experiences, and understanding of phenomena (Kaushik, 2024).

On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre introduced a more existentialist angle to phenomenology, exploring the concepts of freedom, choice, and the inherent absurdity of existence. Sartre's work emphasized the individual's responsibility to create meaning within an indifferent or even absurd world and highlighted the role of consciousness in addressing its complexities. His existential phenomenology underscored human beings' capacity to transcend their circumstances through free will, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of human agency and the existential stakes of phenomenological inquiry (Charette, 2024).

Together, these philosophers expanded the scope of phenomenology from a methodological approach to understanding consciousness to a broader exploration of human existence in its myriad forms. Their collective contributions underscore the discipline's capacity to reveal the profound depths of human experience, offering insights into how individuals explore, interpret, and imbue their world with meaningful meaning. This evolution of phenomenology from Husserl to Sartre represents a dynamic and ongoing dialog about the nature of being, perception, and the essence of human experiences, providing a rich conceptual framework for exploring the complexities of consciousness and existence (Demidyuk and Siregar, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical aspects of phenomenology

As an epistemological framework, phenomenology presents a radical departure from conventional approaches to understanding reality and consciousness. The assertion that reality is constituted through subjective experiences challenges the objectivist paradigms that have dominated Western thought. It reorients the research's focus on nuanced and often overlooked dimensions of human knowledge (Vom Lehn, 2024). This phenomenological stance posits that the richness of reality, especially in the context of consumer behavior, cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures or detached observation. Instead, it advocates for a deep engagement with the lived experiences of individuals, emphasizing the significance of perception, emotion, and meaning in shaping consumer realities (Becker, 2018).

The "bracketing" or "epoché" principle is a methodological compass for phenomenological research. It guides researchers to set aside their biases, theoretical frameworks, and assumptions, allowing them to engage with the phenomenon in its purest form. This intentional suspension of judgment is not merely a methodological step but a

profound epistemic stance that acknowledges the complexity of experience and the limitations of our preconceived notions in capturing it (Van Manen, 2023). Via adopting this stance, researchers open themselves to the subtleties of human experience, allowing for a richer, more authentic understanding of the phenomena under investigation. This approach is particularly vital in consumer research, where the subjective experiences of consumers, rooted in personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and emotional landscapes, play a crucial role in shaping their interactions with products and services (Vasterling, 2021).

Intentionality, as another foundational concept of phenomenology, underscores the inherent directedness of consciousness towards the world. This notion illuminates the active role of consciousness in constituting reality, highlighting the relational dynamics between individuals and their environments (Goulding, 2005). In consumer research, understanding intentionality becomes crucial for unpacking how consumers attribute meaning to their purchases, engage with brands, and address the marketplace (Islam, 2025a). It provides a framework for exploring consumption and the myriad motivations, desires, and meanings that animate consumer behavior (Zahavi, 2018). The focus on intentionality enables researchers to examine the subjective aspects of consumer experiences, illuminating the emotional, cognitive, and social factors that influence consumption patterns.

The evolution of phenomenological methods, mainly through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), has significantly enriched consumer research by offering a systematic approach to exploring the subjective world of consumers. IPA's emphasis on the interpretative efforts of the participant and the researcher in making sense of experiences aligns with the phenomenological commitment to uncovering the layers of meaning underpinning consumer behavior (Johnson and Barlow, 2024). This methodological evolution reaffirms the enduring relevance of phenomenological principles in contemporary research, expanding the tools available to researchers seeking to reconcile the complex landscape of consumer behavior (Van Manen, 2023). Through employing IPA and other phenomenologically inspired methods, researchers can capture the depth and dynamism of consumer experiences, offering insights that are both profound and pragmatically valuable for understanding the ever-changing contours of consumer landscapes (Goulding, 1999).

Phenomenology, which focuses on subjective experiences, employs bracketing, intentionality, and interpretative analysis to offer a robust and nuanced framework for exploring consumer behavior (Razak, 2025). Its principles and methods provide a pathway to understanding the rich tapestry of human experience, challenging researchers to look beyond surface-level interactions and demonstrate the depths of consumer consciousness (Schembri and Sandberg, 2002). This epistemological approach enriches our understanding of consumer behavior and opens new avenues for engaging with the complex realities of human experience in the marketplace (Robert-Demontrond, 2022).

2.3 Phenomenology in consumer research

The integration of phenomenology into the social sciences, including marketing and consumer research, has gained prominence over the years. Researchers have recognized the value of phenomenology in capturing the intricacies of human experiences, particularly in consumer contexts. Phenomenology's ability to explore the lived experiences of consumers, including their emotions, motivations, and decision-making processes, aligns seamlessly with consumer research objectives (Sahhar *et al.*, 2022). It provides a qualitative lens to understand the subjective realities of consumers and uncover the meanings they attribute to their interactions with products and services.

Phenomenological research in social sciences prioritizes the individual's perspective, offering deep insights into consumer behavior that quantitative methods may overlook. This approach enables researchers to delve into consumers' nuanced, personal experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of their behaviors and attitudes. In focusing on personal narratives

and subjective experiences, phenomenology enriches the social sciences with a more empathetic and human-centered approach to understanding consumer behavior (Pula, 2024).

In marketing, phenomenology offers a framework for examining how consumers perceive and interact with brands and products. This approach reveals the emotional and symbolic meanings that consumers associate with their purchases, providing valuable insights for developing brand positioning and marketing strategies. In understanding these deeper connections, marketers can create more resonant and effective campaigns that align with consumer values and experiences (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022). Applying phenomenology in consumer research also extends to understanding consumer culture. It examines how consumers' interactions with products and services are influenced by their cultural backgrounds, societal norms, and personal values. This perspective is invaluable in a globalized market where cultural diversity significantly shapes consumer preferences and behaviors (Yao *et al.*, 2024).

The use of phenomenology in consumer research has also been pivotal in understanding the impact of digital technology on consumer behavior. As digital platforms increasingly mediate consumer interactions, phenomenological research offers valuable insights into how these technologies influence consumer experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes (Briegel and Müller, 2025). Phenomenological methodologies, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, are particularly suited for exploring the experiential dimensions of consumer behavior. These methods facilitate a deeper engagement with participants, allowing researchers to capture the richness and complexity of consumer experiences in their own words and contexts (Masset *et al.*, 2024).

Despite its strengths, phenomenology in consumer research presents challenges, particularly in data interpretation and generalizability. The subjective nature of phenomenological research can lead to varied interpretations, necessitating a careful and rigorous approach to data analysis to ensure validity and reliability. Looking forward, the role of phenomenology in consumer research is poised to grow, particularly as the market becomes more focused on experiential and personalized offerings (Maia, 2020). As consumer preferences evolve, phenomenological research may continue to offer valuable insights into the ever-changing landscape of consumer behavior, enabling the development of more responsive and consumer-centric marketing strategies (Inanc and Kozak, 2021).

2.4 Advancing phenomenological inquiry

The application of phenomenology in consumer research has evolved from its philosophical foundations into a growing, though fragmented, body of work. While the preceding sections have traced the background, theoretical dimensions, and past evidence of phenomenology, there remains a need to consolidate these perspectives into a cohesive discussion that evaluates its contributions, acknowledges persistent methodological challenges, and highlights areas requiring further development. This section, therefore, advances the literature review by synthesizing relevant scholarship, situating tourism as an illustrative yet integral consumer context, and introducing the integrative framework that informs the present study.

Phenomenology originated as a philosophical project aimed at providing a rigorous account of lived experience. Husserl (1931) underscored the centrality of intentionality, whereby consciousness is always oriented toward objects and experiences. Heidegger (1962) emphasized temporality and existence through his concept of *Dasein*, which revealed the inseparability of human life from its cultural and historical contexts. Merleau-Ponty (1962) introduced the concept of embodiment, explaining how the body serves as the primary medium for perception and the creation of meaning. Sartre (1992) further advanced phenomenology by emphasizing human agency and the capacity for choice and meaning creation. Together, these perspectives established phenomenology as an orientation concerned with perception, embodiment, and existential situatedness (Dengen, 2025). Their influence resonates strongly within consumer research, which increasingly acknowledges that consumption involves more than rational decision-making, extending into domains of identity, culture, and sensory engagement (Zahavi, 2018).

The transition of phenomenology into consumer and marketing research was marked by influential works that challenged the positivist dominance of the field. [Holbrook and Hirschman \(1982\)](#) articulated an experiential view of consumption that foregrounded hedonic, symbolic, and esthetic aspects. [Belk \(1988\)](#) illustrated the role of possessions in constructing the extended self, demonstrating the symbolic and personal dimensions of consumer goods. [Thompson et al. \(1989\)](#) employed hermeneutic phenomenology to capture consumer narratives, highlighting how individuals construct meaning through everyday consumption practices. [Goulding \(1999, 2005\)](#) emphasized the methodological significance of phenomenology within interpretive consumer research, arguing that it has the capacity to reveal interpretive richness that complements consumer culture theory ([Askegaard and Linnet, 2011](#)). While these studies collectively expanded the field, they remained primarily descriptive, context-specific, and methodologically inconsistent, pointing to the need for a more systematic and comprehensive framework ([Razak, 2025](#)).

Recent applications of phenomenology have demonstrated its versatility across consumer contexts while also highlighting gaps in coherence. In hospitality, [Van Laer and Orazi \(2024\)](#) analyzed guest narratives to reveal how personal encounters shape loyalty and service perceptions. In tourism, scholars such as [Cohen \(1979\)](#), [Pernecky and Jamal \(2010\)](#), and [McCabe \(2024\)](#) have demonstrated how phenomenological inquiry reveals the immersive and identity-shaping nature of travel experiences. While the inclusion of tourism research can appear redundant, it is more accurately understood as an exemplary context where phenomenology's capacity to explore memory, sensory engagement, and cultural interpretation becomes visible. In branding, [Kumar et al. \(2024\)](#) examined consumer-brand relationships through phenomenological interviews, demonstrating the emotional and symbolic ties that exceed transactional dimensions. In digital consumption, [Lima \(2022\)](#) and [Masset et al. \(2024\)](#) have revealed how online environments reconfigure the experiential dimensions of consumption, while [Divekar et al. \(2021\)](#) have highlighted the symbolic and emotional underpinnings of luxury consumption. Taken together, these studies affirm the continued relevance of phenomenology while also revealing a persistent pattern of fragmentation and a lack of methodological rigor.

Methodological challenges remain a central concern in the literature. [Moustakas \(1994\)](#) emphasized bracketing as a necessary process for reducing researcher bias, yet in practice, this principle is often inconsistently applied. [Giorgi \(2009\)](#) called for methodological rigor in analyzing phenomenological data, warning against oversimplification of participants' accounts. [Wojnar and Swanson \(2007\)](#) emphasized the importance of reflexivity in safeguarding interpretive credibility, while [Smith et al. \(2009\)](#) advanced Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a systematic approach to capture the dynamic interplay between participants' meanings and researchers' interpretations. These contributions highlight the ongoing effort to translate phenomenology's philosophical commitments into consistent empirical practice. Despite advances in methodological discourse, consumer research has yet to establish a unified framework that ensures both conceptual fidelity and empirical applicability ([Inanc and Kozak, 2021](#)).

Several trends emerge from this body of literature. First, phenomenology has consistently been recognized as a valuable approach for exploring the subjective, symbolic, and experiential aspects of consumption. Second, its applications across diverse consumer contexts demonstrate versatility but also reveal persistent inconsistency and fragmentation. Third, methodological debates continue to revolve around rigor, reflexivity, and transparency, yet empirical consumer research often applies these principles only partially. These patterns reveal a clear research gap: while phenomenology has been acknowledged and employed, its principles—intentionality, embodiment, temporality, and reflexivity—have rarely been systematized into a cohesive methodological framework tailored for consumer research ([Dengen, 2025](#)).

The present study addresses this gap directly. It integrates philosophical insights, empirical evidence, and methodological debates into a structured framework that provides conceptual

clarity and practical guidance for future research. Figure 1, introduced here, illustrates the framework guiding this study. It synthesizes phenomenology's theoretical foundations with methodological principles, highlighting its capacity to uncover dimensions of consumer

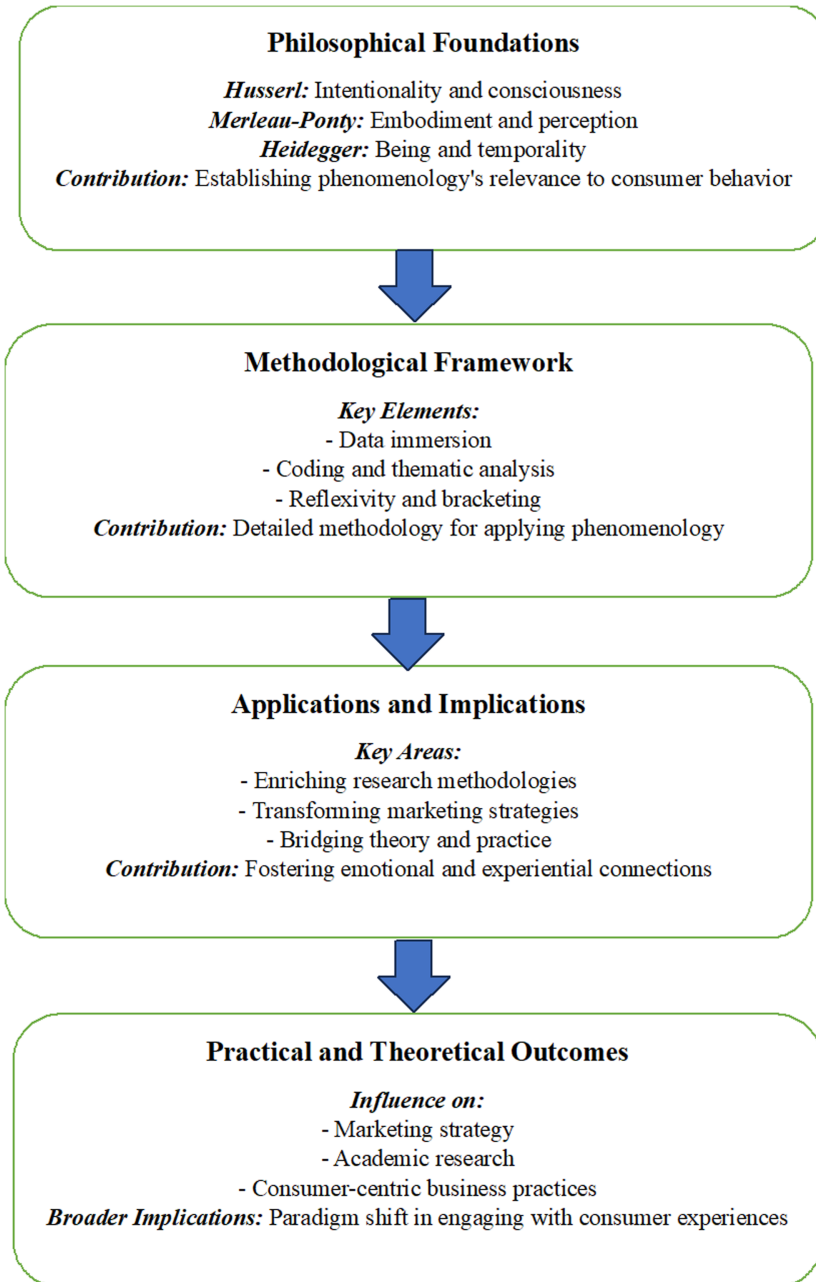


Figure 1. Structure of the paper. Source: By author

experience that are overlooked by quantitative paradigms. Positioned within the literature review, the framework demonstrates how phenomenology can advance consumer research through systematic application, thereby addressing the identified limitations and setting the stage for the subsequent analysis (Briegel and Müller, 2025).

2.5 Past evidence of phenomenology in consumer research

The application of phenomenology in consumer research has yielded valuable insights across diverse sectors, demonstrating its ability to capture the experiential, symbolic, and affective dimensions of marketplace interactions. In the hospitality industry, phenomenological studies have shed light on how service encounters and embodied guest experiences influence satisfaction, loyalty, and memory. For instance, Van Laer and Orazi (2024) examined personal narratives of hotel guests, showing how their interactions with the service environment create lasting impressions that extend beyond functional assessments. These findings underscore the strength of phenomenology in revealing how consumer satisfaction is closely tied to subjective experiences and emotional resonance, rather than purely utilitarian outcomes.

Tourism has emerged as a particularly compelling domain for phenomenological inquiry, as it involves immersive, multisensory, and identity-relevant experiences that exemplify the principles of lived consumption. Scholars such as Cohen (1979), Pernecky and Jamal (2010), and McCabe (2024) have shown how phenomenology captures the interplay of cultural, environmental, and personal factors that shape tourist meaning-making. Unlike transactional or routine consumption contexts, tourism exemplifies the extent to which phenomenology can reveal how individuals construct memories, assign symbolic value to destinations, and derive identity-related significance from their travel experiences. Positioned in this way, tourism studies are not redundant but instead serve as an exemplary illustration of phenomenology's capacity to uncover how consumer experiences extend beyond immediate transactions to broader questions of culture, selfhood, and meaning (Johnson and Barlow, 2024).

Beyond hospitality and tourism, phenomenology has also been applied in marketing and branding research. Studies of consumer–brand relationships have revealed how individuals form enduring emotional bonds with brands, often perceiving them in quasi-human terms. Kumar *et al.* (2024) demonstrated how such attachments foster loyalty and advocacy, highlighting the symbolic and affective layers of brand perception. Similarly, phenomenological investigations into consumer decision-making have provided nuanced insights into how emotional, rational, and cultural dynamics shape choices. Research by Khosrozadeh *et al.* (2021) challenges the traditional rational actor model, illustrating how decision-making is embedded within lived experience and social context.

Digital consumption has also become an important area for phenomenological research, with studies examining how consumers experience online platforms, social media, and e-commerce environments. Lima (2022) showed how digital interactions reshape perceptions of authenticity and trust, while Masset *et al.* (2024) demonstrated how digital immersion transforms experiential engagement in tourism and consumption more broadly. These findings underscore the growing relevance of phenomenology in contexts where technology is increasingly mediating consumer experiences.

Another strand of research has focused on consumer preferences and tastes, examining how cultural trends and social factors influence these. Grace (2021) highlighted how personal histories intersect with broader societal currents to form consumption patterns, offering a richer understanding of preference formation. In the luxury sector, phenomenological inquiry has revealed how exclusivity, symbolism, and emotional gratification underpin consumer engagement. Divekar *et al.* (2021) found that luxury items function as markers of identity and status, reinforcing the symbolic and experiential value of consumption.

Taken together, these studies illustrate both the breadth and adaptability of phenomenology within the field of consumer research. They demonstrate how phenomenology uncovers dimensions of experience—whether in hospitality, tourism, branding, digital environments, or

luxury consumption—that traditional methods often overlook. However, they also highlight the fragmented and context-specific nature of current applications, pointing to the need for a more systematic framework that can consolidate these insights and provide methodological consistency (Yao *et al.*, 2024). This recognition sets the stage for the present study, which addresses these gaps by developing an integrative framework for phenomenological research in consumer studies.

2.6 Positioning phenomenology in consumer research

As a philosophical and methodological framework, phenomenology has undergone significant evolution, offering unique insights into subjective experiences. Its foundations were laid by Edmund Husserl, who emphasized intentionality—the directedness of consciousness toward phenomena—and established a rigorous approach to studying human experience. Building on Husserl’s work, Merleau-Ponty advanced the concept of embodiment, demonstrating how perception is inherently shaped by the body’s interactions with the world (Inanc and Kozak, 2021). Heidegger further expanded phenomenology by introducing existential dimensions, focusing on the interconnectedness of being, context, and temporality. These philosophical underpinnings provide a robust theoretical base for exploring consumer experiences, which are often deeply emotional, subjective, and shaped by personal and cultural contexts. Over time, scholars in consumer research have adopted and adapted phenomenology to address critical gaps in understanding consumer behavior, particularly where traditional quantitative methods fall short. Table 1 summarizes key contributions to phenomenology, illustrating its evolution from foundational philosophy to its application in marketing and consumer research.

The contributions highlighted in Table 1 underscore phenomenology’s dual significance as a theoretical and practical tool in consumer research. Foundational thinkers such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty provide the philosophical depth necessary to examine the richness of lived experiences. At the same time, contemporary scholars like Gabbott and Hogg (2016) and Inanc and Kozak (2021) demonstrate its applicability in addressing real-world marketing challenges. By critiquing the limitations of traditional methods, these studies reveal the potential of phenomenology to uncover nuanced emotional and psychological dimensions of consumer behavior. Furthermore, contributions from Gallagher (2022) and Van Manen (2023) emphasize the methodological advancements necessary for rigorous phenomenological inquiry, including reflexivity and bracketing. Building on these insights, this study aligns with and extends the application of phenomenology by offering a detailed methodological framework tailored to consumer research. Through this integration, the research aims to deepen our understanding of the intricate interplay between consumer emotions, perceptions, and experiences, ultimately enhancing academic inquiry and marketing practice.

2.7 Challenges and limitations of phenomenological research

Phenomenological research, esteemed for its depth and insightful exploration of consumer experiences, confronts distinct challenges and limitations in consumer contexts. The subjective essence of phenomenological inquiry, while its strength, also poses considerable challenges. This methodology relies heavily on participants’ ability to articulate their lived experiences and the researchers’ capacity to interpret these narratives without imposing their own biases. Such subjectivity raises concerns about introducing bias, where the interpretation of experiences can be colored by the researchers’ preconceptions and the participants’ selective narration (Ghodselahi *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, the phenomenological emphasis on depth over breadth often necessitates smaller, more focused sample sizes, which challenges the generalizability of the findings to a broader consumer base. The rigorous and time-intensive nature of collecting and analyzing qualitative data in phenomenology also demands substantial resources, potentially limiting its accessibility and scalability in broader consumer research endeavors (Wilson, 2012).

Table 1. Key contributions to phenomenology and consumer research

Author(s)	Focus	Contribution to phenomenology in consumer research
Husserl (1931)	Intentionality and consciousness	Established phenomenology as a rigorous philosophical approach, focusing on intentionality—how consciousness is directed toward phenomena—and laying the foundation for exploring subjective experiences
Merleau-Ponty (1962)	Embodiment of perception	Expanded phenomenology by emphasizing the role of the body in human experience, proposing that perception is shaped through embodied interactions with the world
Heidegger (1962)	Being and temporality	Developed phenomenology's existential dimensions, focusing on the interconnectedness of human experience, context, and temporality, which has significant implications for understanding consumer behavior <i>in situ</i>
Gabbott and Hogg (2016)	Consumer behavior research	Critiqued the limitations of quantitative methods, advocating for phenomenology as a means to capture the nuanced emotional and subjective dimensions of consumer experiences
Askegaard and Linnet (2011)	Contextualized consumer experiences in CCT frameworks	Highlighted phenomenology's potential to deepen understanding of cultural and social dimensions in consumer research, particularly through Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)
Inanc and Kozak (2021)	Application of phenomenology in marketing research	Demonstrated how phenomenology can reveal emotional and psychological dimensions of consumer behavior, emphasizing its value in marketing strategy and consumer engagement
Gallagher (2022)	Theoretical advancements in phenomenology	Reinforced the importance of phenomenological inquiry in understanding the interplay of perception, emotion, and meaning in complex consumer interactions
Van Manen (2023)	Methodological application of phenomenology	Provided detailed guidelines for phenomenological research, emphasizing the value of reflexivity and bracketing to ensure methodological rigor in consumer studies

Source(s): By author

Despite these challenges, the potential of phenomenological research to enrich studies of consumer behavior is profound. In understanding the lived experiences of consumers, phenomenology uncovers the intricate layers of emotions, motivations, and meanings behind consumer interactions with products and services (Inanc and Kozak, 2021). This approach offers unparalleled insights into the psychological and emotional underpinnings of consumer decisions, beyond the surface-level data that quantitative methods typically provide. Such rich, qualitative insights are invaluable for developing marketing strategies that resonate deeply with consumers, fostering a level of engagement and loyalty that superficial analyses cannot achieve. In a marketplace increasingly defined by consumers' demand for authentic, personalized experiences, the depth of understanding afforded by phenomenological research can guide the creation of offerings that genuinely meet consumer desires and expectations (Gallagher, 2022).

Moreover, phenomenological research's focus on the subjective interpretation of experiences offers a unique lens through which to view consumer behavior, particularly adept at capturing the nuanced influence of cultural, social, and individual factors. This makes it an indispensable tool in a globalized market where various intersecting influences

continuously shape consumer preferences and behaviors (Ferrarello and Hadjioannou, 2024). The ability of phenomenological research to identify and articulate these complex consumer narratives can lead to more culturally sensitive, inclusive marketing strategies that appeal to a diverse consumer base. As businesses strive to investigate the complexities of global consumer markets, the insights gleaned from phenomenological studies can provide a strategic edge, enabling brands to connect with consumers more meaningfully (Ferrarello and Hadjioannou, 2024).

However, while phenomenological research in consumer contexts is not without its challenges, its contributions to understanding consumer behavior are invaluable. The method's ability to probe deeply into the consumer psyche, revealing the rich tapestry of thoughts, feelings, and motivations that drive consumer actions, offers a wealth of insights that can significantly enhance consumer studies experiences (Gabbott and Hogg, 2016). Through acknowledging and addressing its limitations, researchers can leverage phenomenology's full potential, paving the way for more nuanced, empathetic, and practical approaches to marketing and consumer engagement. In an era where consumer expectations are continually evolving, the depth and breadth of understanding that phenomenological research facilitates are more crucial than ever, providing a robust foundation for building future studies and strategies in the dynamic field of consumer behavior (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2024).

3. Methodological framework

The phenomenological approach, deeply rooted in philosophy, serves as the epistemological foundation of this research endeavor. Originating from the philosophical works of Edmund Husserl and further developed by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, in its essence, seeks to fathom the depths of human consciousness and subjective experiences (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2024). This approach is particularly suited to consumer research, where understanding the complex interplay of perceptions, emotions, and behaviors is crucial (Islam, 2025a).

Within consumer research, the phenomenological approach is characterized by its commitment to understanding the meanings consumers attribute to their interactions with products and services. It involves a profound exploration of consumers' lived experiences, encapsulating their emotions, motivations, and the intricacies of their decision-making processes (Islam, 2024, 2025b). Unlike quantitative methods, which measure and predict consumer behavior, phenomenology aims to understand the "how" and "why" behind these behaviors, offering a richer and more nuanced understanding (Aspers and Le Grand, 2024).

A vital aspect of the phenomenological method is the concept of "intentionality," which refers to consciousness always directed towards something—an object, an idea, a feeling. In the context of consumer research, this implies focusing on how consumers consciously relate to products and brands, as well as the meanings they derive from these relationships. Understanding intentionality enables researchers to gain insights into the subjective world of the consumer, which is often characterized by symbolic meanings, emotional attachments, and cultural influences (Ferrarello and Hadjioannou, 2024).

Another essential element in phenomenological research is the "bracketing" or "epoché." This involves setting aside preconceptions and biases to engage fully with the participant's perspective. For consumer researchers, this means approaching each consumer's narrative without preconceived notions about their behaviors or motivations, enabling a more authentic and unfiltered understanding of their experiences. The phenomenological approach in consumer research frequently employs qualitative data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observations, and narrative analyses (Gallagher, 2022). These methods are well-suited for capturing the richness of consumer experiences, enabling researchers to gather detailed and personal accounts of how consumers interact with and perceive various products and services (Islam, 2025b).

Phenomenology also emphasizes the importance of the “lifeworld” – the everyday lived experience of individuals. In consumer research, this translates to understanding how consumers integrate products and services into their daily lives and the role these products and services play in shaping their identities and lifestyles. Through exploring the lifeworld of consumers, researchers can uncover how consumption is intertwined with broader life narratives and personal meanings (Kaushik, 2024). The phenomenological approach in consumer research presents its own challenges. The subjective nature of the method, while its strength, also poses difficulties in ensuring objectivity and generalizability. However, proponents argue that the depth and quality of insights gained from phenomenological research justify its use, especially when understanding the depth of human experience is critical (Charette, 2024).

Phenomenological research endeavors to unearth the intricate world of consumer behavior through a qualitative lens. It steps beyond surface-level observations and statistics to investigate the complex tapestry of human emotions, perceptions, and experiences that underlie consumer behavior. This approach offers a unique and invaluable perspective on understanding the ever-evolving landscape of consumer needs and preferences (Demidyuk and Siregar, 2023).

3.1 Data collection

3.1.1 Selection of participants. In phenomenological inquiry, the recruitment of participants is a methodological decision that directly shapes the quality and credibility of the study. The use of purposive sampling ensures that individuals are selected because of their direct and meaningful engagement with the phenomenon under investigation, enabling them to provide narratives that reveal the richness of lived experience (Kaushik, 2024; Inanc and Kozak, 2021). Establishing clear inclusion criteria aligned with the research objectives ensures that participants are selected not arbitrarily, but based on their relevance to the phenomenon (Gabbott and Hogg, 2016). Recruitment may draw upon professional networks, consumer communities, or digital platforms, depending on the context and the population most capable of articulating the experiences under study (Aspers and Le Grand, 2024). While variation in demographic and experiential backgrounds can strengthen analysis, maintaining relevance to the research focus is essential to capture the emotional, symbolic, and contextual dimensions of consumer behavior (Gallagher, 2022). Equally important is the ethical dimension of recruitment: participants should be fully informed of the study’s purpose, their expected contributions, and the safeguards in place to ensure confidentiality and consent (Vom Lehn, 2024). Documenting these procedures contributes to transparency and replicability, allowing participant selection to serve as a methodological foundation rather than a routine procedural step.

3.1.2 Data gathering techniques (e.g. interviews, observations). Phenomenological research relies heavily on in-depth data-gathering techniques to capture the richness of subjective experiences. Standard methods include semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Interviews provide participants with the opportunity to articulate their experiences, feelings, and perceptions in their own words (Islam, 2025c). These interviews are conducted in a manner that encourages open and honest dialog, allowing participants to reflect on their interactions with consumer products and services. On the other hand, observations offer an opportunity to capture behavior in its natural context, providing a holistic view of consumer experiences (Van Manen, 2023). Additionally, researchers may employ methods such as focus groups to facilitate group dynamics and discussions that can reveal shared experiences and social influences on consumer behavior.

3.1.3 Data recording and documentation. Accurate recording and documentation are critical in phenomenological research to ensure the integrity of the data collected. During interviews, researchers typically use audio recordings to capture the full extent of participants’ responses, supplemented by note-taking to document nonverbal cues and context.

Observational data may be recorded through field notes, photographs, or video recordings, depending on the context and the research objectives (Vasterling, 2021). The documentation process is meticulous, with attention to capturing the nuances of each participant's narrative and the contexts of their experiences.

3.1.4 Ethical considerations. Ethical considerations are paramount in phenomenological research, particularly given the personal and often sensitive nature of the collected data. Researchers are obligated to obtain informed consent from participants, ensuring they understand the purpose of the study and how their data will be used. Privacy and confidentiality must be maintained, with data anonymized to protect participant identities (Zahavi, 2018). Additionally, researchers must be sensitive to the emotional well-being of participants, particularly when discussions may evoke strong emotions or personal memories.

3.2 Data analysis approach

In employing phenomenology within consumer research, particularly when investigating the intricate perceptions of sustainable practices among boutique hotel guests, the importance of a sophisticated data analysis approach cannot be overstated. This approach serves as the backbone of our methodological framework and the lens through which the nuanced essence of consumer experiences is brought to light. Through a structured yet flexible analytic process, we embark on a journey that begins with the foundational phase of Data Immersion, gradually progressing through Open Coding and axial Coding, and culminating in the rich synthesis of thematic analysis (Van Manen, 2023). Each step is meticulously designed to peel away the layers of participant experiences, allowing us to capture and interpret the profound meanings embedded within (Islam, 2025d). This data analysis approach, rooted in the principles of phenomenology, enables us to transcend mere observations, providing deep insights into the lived experiences of consumers in the context of sustainability in the hospitality industry. Through this rigorous analytical process, we may uncover the intricate interplay between consumer perceptions and sustainable practices, contributing valuable perspectives to the broader discourse on sustainability in the consumer buying market (Robert-Demontrond, 2022).

3.2.1 Data Immersion. The data immersion phase (see Table 2) is akin to an anthropologist embedding themselves within a culture to grasp its intricacies. Researchers would spend extensive periods engaging with the data, noting initial impressions and emerging patterns. For example, they might notice that discussions about the hotel's zero-waste policy frequently coincide with expressions of guests' values toward sustainability. This deep dive enables researchers to read the data and feel the rhythm of respondents' experiences, setting a solid foundation for the analytical drive ahead.

3.2.2 Open Coding. Open coding is both careful and creative. Researchers might encounter a vivid description of a guest's surprise and delight at the hotel's innovative water-saving solutions, for instance, which could be coded as "Innovative sustainability practices." This stage requires a balance between analytical precision and interpretive openness, allowing for a rich tapestry of codes that capture the multifaceted nature of guests' experiences and perceptions (Van Manen, 2023).

3.2.3 Axial coding. Axial coding is the connective tissue that weaves isolated codes into a more coherent narrative. For example, if the codes "Innovative sustainability practices" and "Guests' environmental consciousness" frequently appear together, researchers might conceptualize a broader category, such as "Environmental Identity and Guest Satisfaction." This phase marks the beginning of the analytical process, which reveals the interconnectedness of various aspects of the guest experience, highlighting complex dynamics that may influence guests' overall perceptions of a hotel (Van Manen, 2023).

3.2.4 Thematic analysis. During thematic analysis, researchers elevate the analysis from codes and categories to overarching themes that capture the essence of the data corpus. "Environmental Identity and Guest Satisfaction" might merge with other categories to form a

Table 2. Data analysis approach in phenomenological research on consumer behavior

Step no.	Phase	Description	Objective/Outcome (examples)
1	Data Immersion	Engaging deeply with the data to grasp the nuances of guests' experiences is like an anthropologist studying a culture	To establish a foundational understanding of the data, we identified initial patterns and gained profound insights into guests' perceptions of sustainability
2	Open Coding	Systematically categorizes data into meaningful fragments, balancing analytical precision and interpretive openness	To identify initial codes that reflect the multifaceted nature of guests' experiences and perceptions
3	Axial Coding	Connecting isolated codes to weave a coherent narrative, highlighting the relationships and dynamics between the data's different aspects	To organize the data into meaningful categories, revealing complex dynamics that may influence guests' overall perceptions and experiences
4	Thematic Analysis	Elevating the analysis from codes and categories to overarching themes that encapsulate the essence of the data corpus	To develop broader themes that capture the nuanced understanding of how sustainability influences guest experiences and decision-making
5	Interpretation	Integrating the themes with existing research and theory to provide a nuanced understanding of the findings	To contextualize the findings within the broader scholarly conversation on sustainability in hospitality, the study identifies how it aligns with, diverges from, or extends current theories
6	Validation	Strategies like focus groups with original participants ensure the research's integrity and credibility	To verify the accuracy of the interpretations and deepen the analysis by incorporating participants' reflections, which may lead to refinements or additional insights
7	Reflexive Journaling	Documenting the researcher's reflections and biases throughout the analysis process	To acknowledge and manage biases, strive for a balanced and authentic representation of the data
8	Synthesis	Crafting a comprehensive narrative integrating the research process's themes, insights, and reflections	To present a compelling and insightful narrative that summarizes findings and contributes valuable perspectives to the discourse on sustainability in the hospitality industry

Source(s): By author

theme such as “Integrating Environmental Identity with Hospitality Experiences.” This theme encapsulates how guests’ values around sustainability intersect with their satisfaction and appreciation of the hotel’s efforts, offering nuanced insights into the role of environmental consciousness in hospitality settings (Van Manen, 2023).

3.2.5 Interpretation. Interpretation involves researchers reweaving the themes into the fabric of existing research and theory, considering how their findings align with, diverge from, or extend current understandings. They might argue that the theme “Integrating Environmental Identity with Hospitality Experiences” underscores a growing trend where environmental considerations are not just added amenities but core components of the value proposition for specific hospitality market segments (Van Manen, 2023). This phase is critical for situating the study within the broader scholarly conversation on sustainability in hospitality and tourism.

3.2.6 Validation. In validation, the emphasis is on ensuring the research’s integrity and credibility. This could involve organizing focus groups with a subset of the original participants to discuss the themes and interpretations in more detail. Such engagement checks the researchers’ interpretations and deepens the analysis by incorporating participants’

reflections on the findings, potentially leading to refinements or additional insights (Van Manen, 2023).

3.2.7 Reflexive journaling. Reflexive journalism is an ongoing process where researchers continually interrogate their positions, perspectives, and biases. For instance, a researcher's strong belief in sustainability might lead them to highlight positive sustainability practices while overlooking criticisms unconsciously. Via acknowledging these biases in reflexive journals, researchers aim to mitigate their influence, striving for a balanced and authentic representation of the data (Van Manen, 2023).

3.2.8 Synthesis. Synthesis is the culmination of the analytical phase, where researchers craft a comprehensive narrative that integrates themes, theoretical insights, and reflections on the research process. The narrative might highlight how the boutique hotel industry is at a crossroads, where integrating sustainability responds to market demand and contributes to the industry's long-term viability (Van Manen, 2023). This final phase is more than summarizing findings; it is about telling the research story in a compelling, insightful, and meaningful way to academic and industry audiences.

4. Findings

4.1 Presentation of phenomenological data

At the outset, the introduction to the findings serves as the entry point, gently ushering the reader into the thematic heart of the study. It achieves this by presenting the core themes and insights that have emerged from the collected data, directly linking them to the research objectives that initially framed the study. This introduction also sketches a brief but compelling portrait of the phenomenological approach adopted, underpinning its pivotal role in unraveling the layers of consumer behavior (Sahhar *et al.*, 2022). It further enriches the context by providing a snapshot of the participant demographics, thereby setting a solid foundation for expectations for the following insights (see Table 3).

Moving into the thematic presentation of data, the research unfolds through a meticulous examination of themes, beginning with a detailed description of each theme. Each theme is thoroughly examined, tracing its roots back to the narratives from which it emerged, and is then deliberately placed within the existing tapestry of consumer behavior literature. This establishes the relevance of each theme and bridges the individual consumer experiences with broader behavioral patterns (Pula, 2024). Incorporating Participant narratives lends a voice to the data, offering direct, unadulterated glimpses into the consumers' worlds. These narratives, selected for their vivid portrayal of consumer experiences, form the emotional and experiential backbone of the thematic analysis, providing a diverse range of perspectives that highlight the complexity of consumer interactions in the marketplace.

Observational data adds another layer of depth, providing a lens through which to view consumer behaviors and interactions in their natural habitat. This observational layer, replete with descriptions of behaviors, contexts, and even non-verbal cues, complements the rich tapestry woven by participant narratives, offering a more well-rounded understanding of the themes at hand. The process of reflexive analysis then takes center stage, inviting a moment of introspection where the researcher's biases and preconceptions are brought to light, and their influence on the study's trajectory and findings is pondered (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022). This reflexivity is critical, ensuring that the analysis remains rooted in the authenticity of the participants' experiences while being mindful of the interpretive lens through which these experiences are viewed.

Literature contextualization situates the study's findings within the broader scholarly discourse, drawing parallels and distinctions that highlight the research's unique contributions to the field of consumer behavior. This section not only underscores the theoretical implications of the findings but also explores their practical applications, suggesting pathways through which marketers and practitioners can leverage these insights to forge more profound and meaningful connections with consumers (Masset *et al.*, 2024). Illustrative examples and

Table 3. Presentation of data in phenomenological research on consumer behavior

Section	Key components	Actions (examples)
Introduction to Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Core themes and insights ✓ Methodological approach ✓ Study objectives Participant overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the main themes derived from the data, ensuring a clear connection to study objectives • Outline the phenomenological approach, emphasizing its relevance to consumer behavior research • Provide an overview of participant demographics and selection criteria • Set expectations for the depth and nature of insights gained
Thematic Presentation of Data	(1) Detailed Theme Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the relevance and origin of each theme, linking back to research questions • Discuss how each theme reflects the complexity of participants' lived experiences • Mention the prevalence of themes across narratives to highlight significance • Provide a theoretical context for each theme, relating it to existing literature
	(2) Participant Narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present direct, minimally edited quotes for authenticity, accompanied by participant identifiers (e.g. P1, P2) • Select quotes illustrating the depth and variety of experiences related to each theme • Include contrasting perspectives where relevant to demonstrate the diversity of participant experiences • Narrate how these quotes informed the evolution of themes
	(3) Observational Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail observational insights, noting specific behaviors, interactions, and contexts that illuminate themes • Describe any environmental or non-verbal cues that deepen understanding of participant experiences • Relate observations to participant narratives for a multi-dimensional analysis • Highlight how observations corroborate or expand upon interview data
	(4) Reflexive Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide interpretive commentary, elucidating the significance of themes within the broader research context • Reflect on the researcher's biases and preconceptions, discussing their potential influence on the study • Share insights gained through reflexivity that impacted data interpretation • Discuss the dynamic interplay between researcher perspectives and participant narratives
	(5) Literature Contextualization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situate findings within the broader academic discourse, drawing parallels and distinctions • Highlight theoretical contributions or divergences stemming from the analysis • Discuss the practical implications of findings for marketing strategies and consumer engagement • Propose how these insights could inform future research directions in consumer behavior

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Section	Key components	Actions (examples)
Illustrative Examples and Case Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Narrative depth ✓ Case study diversity ✓ Emotion and perception ✓ Consumer decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide in-depth narratives or case studies that illustrate complex consumer experiences • Ensure diversity in case studies to cover a broad spectrum of consumer behaviors and demographics • Explore the emotional and perceptual aspects of the analysis • Investigate the impact of identified themes on consumer decision-making processes
Reflexivity and the Researcher's Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Personal reflection ✓ Influence on the research process ✓ Bias management ✓ Impact on findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaborate on the iterative process of reflection and its influence on the research journey • Discuss specific instances where the researcher's background impacted the study • Detail methods employed to manage and minimize biases • Reflect on the impact of researcher subjectivity on the interpretation of findings
Conclusion of Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Summary of findings ✓ Theoretical implications ✓ Practical applications ✓ Future research directions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize key findings and their contribution to understanding consumer behavior • Discuss theoretical implications, suggesting areas for further exploration within consumer research • Outline practical applications, highlighting how marketers and practitioners can leverage insights • Suggest future research directions, considering the study's limitations and emerging themes

Source(s): By author

case studies bring the themes to life, presenting detailed narratives that encapsulate the essence of consumer experiences. These examples, carefully selected for their narrative depth and emotional resonance, illuminate the complex interplay of factors influencing consumer decision-making and perception, providing tangible illustrations of the themes in action. The discussion on reflexivity and the researcher's Role underscores the iterative journey of reflection that permeates the research process, highlighting how the researcher's lens and biases are addressed and managed to preserve the integrity of the findings (Maia, 2020).

4.2 Interpreting the findings

The interpretation of phenomenological findings extends the inquiry beyond the presentation of emergent themes to consider their broader significance for consumer research and methodological practice. While descriptive analysis identifies recurrent patterns in participants' narratives, the interpretative phase asks what these narratives reveal about the nature of consumer experience, how they resonate with established theories, and in what ways they extend or challenge existing knowledge. This interpretative stance is crucial for researchers who wish to employ phenomenology not only as a means of uncovering data but also as a tool for advancing conceptual and methodological insights.

One of the strongest findings relates to the theme of authenticity in consumption. When participants expressed a preference for artisanal or handcrafted products, the interpretation must move beyond simply documenting consumer choice. The narratives suggest a more nuanced exploration of identity, values, and temporality within a market saturated with mass-produced goods. This can be read in light of consumer culture theory's attention to symbolic consumption (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011); however, a phenomenological interpretation adds nuance by showing how authenticity is lived and embodied in everyday practices, such as

touch, smell, and storytelling (Kaushik, 2024). Thus, authenticity is not only a discourse in the marketplace but also a lived experience through which consumers construct and affirm their sense of self.

A second significant theme concerns the concept of belonging and community attachment. Descriptions of loyalty to family-owned or local businesses reveal how consumer practices embody moral and social choices that cannot be explained solely through utilitarian satisfaction. Interpreted phenomenologically, these accounts highlight how consumption practices enact relational values, such as trust, intimacy, and solidarity. This finding resonates with Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self, but it extends this concept by demonstrating that the self is constituted through ongoing, embodied interactions with others in communal settings. For future researchers, this highlights the importance of considering consumption as a moral and existential practice, rather than a purely economic act.

Another interpretative insight arises in relation to digital consumption practices. Participants' ambivalence—experiencing both empowerment and anxiety—underscores the paradoxical role of technology in shaping contemporary consumer life. While traditional research might quantify this tension through satisfaction scores or behavioral metrics, phenomenological interpretation demonstrates that technology is lived as a paradox: simultaneously offering connection and inducing dependence. This observation aligns with critiques of rationalist models of decision-making (Gabbott and Hogg, 2016) and suggests that digital consumption must be analyzed as an embodied, temporal, and emotionally charged experience. For methodological practice, this finding highlights the value of incorporating reflexivity and interpretative depth when engaging with technologically mediated consumer narratives.

The interpretative process also reinforces the importance of reflexivity. Researchers must recognize that their own preconceptions inevitably influence their understanding of the findings. However, rather than being treated as a limitation, reflexivity should be viewed as a resource for clarifying the interpretative process and situating the researcher within the field of study (Goulding, 1999, 2005; Kaushik, 2024). By acknowledging and documenting these influences, researchers strengthen the credibility of phenomenological interpretations and provide transparency for future replication.

Taken together, these interpretations demonstrate that phenomenology has the capacity not only to contribute descriptive richness but also to advance theoretical understanding. Through situating findings against established constructs—such as authenticity, identity, embodiment, and belonging—phenomenological studies can refine and extend existing theories of consumer behavior. The methodological implication is that researchers should treat interpretation as an integral phase of analysis, where themes are contextualized, related to theory, and critically examined for their broader significance. In this way, phenomenology becomes a tool for theory building, offering insights that move beyond surface descriptions toward a richer understanding of how consumers live, feel, and assign meaning to their marketplace experiences.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of phenomenological data

The discussion of phenomenological data must extend beyond the presentation of descriptive themes to emphasize the interpretative stance that distinguishes this approach. Phenomenology requires researchers to treat emergent categories not as endpoints but as openings into how meanings are constituted in lived experience. In consumer research, this means moving from cataloging what participants say toward examining how their narratives illuminate constructs such as intentionality, embodiment, and temporality (Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Kaushik, 2024). Researchers adopting this approach are encouraged to examine how consumer experiences are situated within cultural and social contexts, rather than interpreting them solely as individual preferences.

From a methodological standpoint, the analysis demonstrates that phenomenological themes such as authenticity, belonging, or attachment cannot be understood in isolation. They must be read in relation to theoretical traditions in consumer behavior that have long highlighted symbolic and experiential dimensions (Belk, 1988; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). The implication for scholars is that phenomenological findings should be interpreted dialogically, positioned in relation to existing theories to highlight both continuity and divergence, doing so ensures that phenomenology contributes not only rich descriptions but also theoretical refinements that advance consumer research paradigms (Aspers and Le Grand, 2024).

The discussion also highlights reflexivity as a methodological imperative rather than an optional practice. Researchers must remain critically aware of how their own assumptions shape interpretation. As Goulding (1999, 2005) and Kaushik (2024) caution, reflexivity is not a hindrance but a safeguard that maintains fidelity to participants' accounts while enabling interpretative depth. For methodological practice, this means incorporating reflexive memos, iterative questioning, and explicit acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality. Such practices strengthen both transparency and rigor, enhancing the trustworthiness of phenomenological inquiry.

Another implication concerns the role of sensory and embodied practices in consumer experience. Observations of ritualized behaviors, such as the multisensory act of selecting and savoring artisanal products, demonstrate how meaning is constituted through the body as much as through language (Gallagher, 2022; Inanc and Kozak, 2021). For researchers, this underscores the importance of designing studies that capture not only verbal accounts but also embodied actions and contextual cues. Incorporating observational methods or videographic analysis can complement interviews, producing a more layered understanding of consumption (Masset *et al.*, 2024).

Ultimately, the discussion demonstrates that phenomenology should be viewed as a theory-building methodology rather than a descriptive technique. By situating findings within broader theoretical conversations—such as social identity, consumer culture, and symbolic interactionism—phenomenological inquiry contributes interpretative insights that expand conceptual boundaries. For scholars seeking to adopt phenomenology, this requires treating data analysis as an interpretative act that both engages participants' voices and tests the adequacy of existing theoretical frameworks. In this way, phenomenology becomes a methodological resource for advancing consumer research, not simply an alternative mode of qualitative description.

6. Conclusion

This manuscript positions phenomenology as a transformative framework in consumer research, offering a bridge between its philosophical depth and practical application in understanding the intricate dimensions of consumer behavior. By integrating key theoretical constructs such as intentionality, embodiment, and temporality, this study highlights phenomenology's unique capacity to reveal the subjective, emotional, and experiential aspects of consumer decision-making. It addresses critical gaps in existing literature, where traditional quantitative methods often fall short in capturing the richness and complexity of lived consumer experiences. Furthermore, the research comprehensively discusses its theoretical and practical implications, acknowledges its limitations, and highlights major takeaways to guide future research and practical applications (Table 1A and Table 2A.)

6.1 Theoretical implications

The findings presented in this manuscript advance consumer behavior research by demonstrating how phenomenology complements and enriches existing theoretical frameworks. For instance, traditional loyalty models often emphasize transactional and behavioral dimensions, such as repeat purchases or preference consistency. However, this study uncovers the profound emotional attachment consumers form with brands, driven by subjective experiences and personal narratives. For example, a consumer's loyalty to a luxury

brand may not solely stem from product quality or price competitiveness but from the deeply personal meanings associated with the brand's symbolism, heritage, or exclusivity. This insight challenges existing models by encouraging a shift toward more holistic frameworks that integrate emotional and experiential dimensions into theories of brand loyalty.

Additionally, this manuscript contributes to experiential marketing by emphasizing the role of sensory and contextual triggers in shaping consumer perceptions. For example, while current theories often focus on cognitive evaluations of value, this study reveals how tactile, auditory, and visual elements—such as the texture of a product, the ambiance of a store, or the immersive storytelling in an advertisement—can evoke robust emotional responses. These findings underscore the need to refine theoretical models of consumer behavior to incorporate the interplay between sensory experiences and emotional engagement, thereby aligning them more closely with phenomenological insights.

Moreover, by employing phenomenology to explore temporal aspects of consumer experiences, this study sheds light on how past interactions and future expectations influence present decisions. For example, a consumer's preference for a particular brand may be informed by cherished memories of using its products in meaningful life events, such as weddings or family vacations, creating an enduring emotional connection. Similarly, anticipation of future experiences, such as the promise of exclusivity or innovation, may shape purchase decisions. These findings invite theoretical frameworks to move beyond static interpretations of consumer behavior and embrace dynamic, temporal perspectives that reflect the evolving nature of consumer-brand relationships.

Finally, this study makes a methodological contribution by providing a structured phenomenological approach that captures the layers of meaning consumers attach to their interactions with products and services. Via emphasizing reflexivity, bracketing, and thematic analysis, this framework offers researchers tools to uncover the subjective and often unarticulated dimensions of consumer experiences. This methodological rigor deepens our understanding of consumer behavior and prompts a reevaluation of existing theories to incorporate these rich, qualitative insights.

6.2 Practical implications

This study provides actionable insights for marketers, brand managers, and consumer engagement strategists, highlighting the importance of crafting consumer experiences that deeply resonate with both emotional and psychological needs. For instance, phenomenological findings emphasize the role of sensory elements in shaping consumer perceptions. Marketers can leverage these insights by creating immersive brand experiences, such as curating specific music, lighting, and scents in retail spaces, to evoke positive emotions and foster memorable interactions. A luxury fashion brand, for example, might use ambient lighting and soft background music to enhance the exclusivity of its boutiques, reinforcing the consumer's emotional connection to the brand.

Personalization also emerges as a key strategy informed by phenomenology. By understanding the unique meanings and motivations consumers attach to products, brands can design tailored marketing messages and experiences. For example, a travel company could utilize phenomenological insights to create personalized vacation packages that align with consumers' aspirations, such as promoting destinations that cater to relaxation, adventure, or cultural exploration. This approach goes beyond demographic-based targeting to connect with consumers on a deeper, more emotional level.

Furthermore, the study underscores the value of storytelling in marketing. Phenomenological research reveals that consumers often construct narratives around their brand interactions, contributing to their loyalty and satisfaction. Companies can use this insight to craft compelling brand stories that align with consumers' values and identities. For instance, a sustainability-focused brand could highlight stories of ethical sourcing and community impact, resonating with consumers who prioritize environmental and social responsibility.

The practical framework presented in this paper also provides a roadmap for businesses to decipher complex consumer behaviors and cultivate stronger relationships. In industries such as hospitality, where experiences are inherently emotional and subjective, phenomenological insights can inform service design. A hotel chain, for example, might use phenomenology to enhance guest satisfaction by addressing subtle emotional triggers, such as personalized greetings, thoughtful gestures like welcome notes, or sensory cues like calming scents in rooms.

Finally, this paper encourages practitioners to adopt a reflexive approach to consumer engagement. Businesses can build more authentic and empathetic relationships by considering how their strategies influence and are influenced by consumer emotions and perceptions. This is particularly relevant in competitive markets, where creating meaningful connections can differentiate brands and cultivate long-term loyalty.

6.3 Limitations of the study and future research directions

While this manuscript makes significant theoretical and practical contributions, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, which provide opportunities for future research. First, the findings and implications are grounded in specific consumer contexts, such as hospitality and experiential marketing, which may not fully represent the diversity of consumer behaviors across industries. For instance, the dynamics of digital consumer interactions in e-commerce, as well as the impact of AI-driven personalization, remain underexplored. Extending this framework to different domains could help test its broader applicability.

Methodologically, phenomenology inherently involves a degree of subjectivity in data collection and analysis. Despite employing reflexivity and bracketing to mitigate biases, interpreting lived experiences often depends on the researcher's perspective, which can potentially limit replicability across studies. To address this, future research could incorporate mixed-method approaches, combining phenomenological insights with quantitative data to enhance the reliability and generalizability of findings.

Another limitation lies in the generalizability of phenomenological research. Its emphasis on subjective experiences and deep contextual analysis is invaluable for understanding specific consumer behaviors, but poses challenges when attempting to scale insights to broader populations. Future studies could explore the integration of phenomenological findings with consumer segmentation frameworks to balance depth and applicability.

Additionally, the temporal nature of phenomenological research restricts its relevance to specific moments in time. Insights drawn from consumer experiences may become less relevant as preferences and behaviors evolve rapidly. To address this, longitudinal studies are needed to track changes in consumer experiences over time and ensure the theoretical and practical implications remain current.

Finally, while this study provides a robust framework for applying phenomenology in consumer research, transitioning from research findings to actionable strategies for practitioners may require additional refinement. Practitioners might face challenges in operationalizing phenomenological insights within real-world business constraints. Future research could address this gap by developing tools or templates to facilitate the application of phenomenological findings in business practices.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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