

The Meaning of Self-Reward: A Phenomenological Exploration of Consumer Experiences in Everyday Consumption

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Abstract: The contemporary consumption landscape has shifted from merely fulfilling functional needs to symbolic and emotional experiences, within which the self-reward phenomenon has become a prominent practice. However, existing literature remains largely dominated by quantitative approaches that focus on behavioral antecedents, thereby providing a limited exploration of how consumers assign meaning to their lived experiences regarding self-reward. This research aims to explore the meaning of self-reward through the lens of consumer lived experiences in everyday consumption. This research involved eight informants in Makassar City, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and relevant documentation. Data analysis reveals that self-reward is not merely a materialistic purchasing act but a multidimensional experiential practice. The findings identify key emerging dimensions, namely: Self-Appreciation, Emotional Restoration, Personal Achievement, Identity Affirmation, and Psychological Well-Being. Consumers construct the meaning of self-reward as an intrapersonal symbolic dialogue and a coping mechanism to restore emotional balance and negotiate identity amid the demands of modern life. This study contributes to consumer behavior literature by revealing that self-reward is constructed as an intrapersonal symbolic dialogue grounded in perceived deservingness and conscious reflection, through which consumers transform everyday consumption into a meaningful process of emotional restoration, identity affirmation, and psychological well-being. These findings provide practical implications for marketers to design ethical and meaningful consumption experiences that emphasize personal achievement rather than mere product acquisition.

Keywords: self-reward, consumer behavior, lived experiences, meaning construction, emotional restoration, self-appreciation

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary consumption landscape has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade. Consumption is no longer understood merely as an economic activity intended to satisfy functional needs but has increasingly evolved into a psychological, emotional, and symbolic experience through which individuals construct meanings about themselves and their lives (Laukkanen & Tura, 2022; Persson & Hinton, 2023; Sgroi & Modica, 2024). Within increasingly complex social and economic environments, consumers often engage in purchasing behaviors not because products are immediately necessary but because consumption itself represents an expression of personal identity, emotional regulation, and self-appreciation (Purcărea et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022). Recent developments in consumer behavior literature suggest that purchasing decisions are becoming progressively experience-oriented, where emotional value frequently outweighs utilitarian value. Consequently, understanding consumption requires moving beyond traditional economic perspectives toward a more holistic appreciation of consumer's lived experiences and the meanings embedded within everyday purchasing practices. One phenomenon that has attracted increasing scholarly attention is self-reward consumption. Self-reward refers to consumers' intentional decisions to purchase products, services, or experiences as a form of appreciation for personal accomplishments, emotional recovery, or psychological well-being (Bhardwaj & Sharma, 2025a; Gbadamosi et al., 2026; Hartono & Abdullah, 2026; Mei, 2023). Unlike impulsive buying, self-reward generally involves conscious reflection in which consumers perceive consumption as a deserved acknowledgment of their efforts, sacrifices, or achievements. The growing popularity of expressions such as "I deserve this," "treat yourself," and "self-care spending" across contemporary society illustrates how consumption has become intertwined with emotional restoration and personal fulfillment. Rather than being viewed solely as financial expenditure, self-reward increasingly functions as a symbolic mechanism through which individuals celebrate success, reduce stress, and maintain emotional balance amid the demands of modern life.

One of the driving forces behind the increasing prominence of self-reward is its transformation into a popular cultural phenomenon amplified by digital media and consumer culture. Expressions such as "Treat Yourself," "You Deserve It," and "Self-Care Spending" have become pervasive across social media platforms, lifestyle branding, and influencer-generated content, normalizing consumption as a socially acceptable form of emotional recovery and self-recognition. This cultural shift is reflected in broader market trends showing the rapid expansion of the global wellness economy, valued at more than USD 6.3 trillion in 2023, alongside sustained growth in the beauty, personal care, travel, and experiential consumption sectors that increasingly position self-reward as part of everyday lifestyles rather than occasional indulgence (Seman & Akdol Doyuran, 2026). At the same time, digital platforms encourage individuals to publicly share self-reward experiences, reinforcing new cultural narratives in which personal achievements are celebrated through consumption rituals (Pookaiyaudom, 2026). Consequently, self-reward has evolved beyond an individual purchasing decision into a socially legitimized practice embedded within contemporary consumer culture. Despite its widespread acceptance, scholarly understanding of how consumers themselves interpret and construct the meaning of these practices remains limited, particularly in the context of emerging economies such as Indonesia. This gap provides an important social rationale for examining self-reward as a lived experience rather than merely a market-driven purchasing behavior.

The emergence of self-reward consumption is closely associated with broader societal transformations characterized by accelerated lifestyles, increasing work pressures, economic uncertainty, and continuous digital connectivity (Batat, 2025; Kochkina et al., 2025). Individuals are expected to remain productive, competitive, and socially visible while simultaneously managing multiple personal and professional responsibilities (Abbas et al., 2024; Serenko, 2024; Wei et al., 2023). Such conditions often generate psychological fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and chronic

stress, encouraging consumers to seek immediate forms of emotional restoration through consumption. Purchasing a favorite meal after completing an important project, booking a short vacation following months of intensive work, or buying long-desired personal items after achieving financial goals are increasingly perceived as meaningful rituals rather than extravagant indulgences. Consequently, self-reward has become embedded within everyday life as a mechanism for maintaining psychological resilience and personal well-being in contemporary society. Despite the increasing visibility of self-reward within everyday consumer practices, existing academic literature remains dominated by quantitative investigations emphasizing causal relationships among hedonic motivation, emotional value, impulsive buying, materialism, purchase intention, and customer satisfaction (Bhardwaj & Sharma, 2025b; Heredero et al., 2025). Previous studies have successfully identified numerous antecedents and consequences of self-reward behavior; however, they have largely conceptualized self-reward as an observable behavioral outcome rather than a subjective human experience. Such approaches explain what predicts self-reward purchasing but provide limited understanding of how consumers themselves interpret these experiences, assign meaning to them, and integrate them into their personal life narratives. Consequently, important experiential dimensions of self-reward remain theoretically underexplored.

This theoretical limitation becomes increasingly significant because self-reward represents far more than the acquisition of products or services. Individuals often attach deeply personal meanings to their purchases, interpreting them as symbols of perseverance, resilience, personal growth, independence, or emotional recovery. Two consumers purchasing the same product may experience entirely different psychological meanings depending on their life circumstances, motivations, and personal histories. Such diversity of interpretation cannot be fully captured through standardized measurement scales or statistical models alone. Understanding self-reward therefore requires exploring consumer's lived experiences, allowing researchers to uncover how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transformed throughout everyday consumption practices. If these experiential processes continue to receive limited scholarly attention, both theoretical development and practical consumer understanding may remain incomplete. Marketing strategies may continue emphasizing material acquisition while overlooking consumers' deeper emotional and psychological needs. Likewise, public discussions surrounding self-reward may become polarized between encouraging excessive consumption and criticizing consumer indulgence without recognizing the complex meanings individuals attach to these behaviors. A richer understanding of consumers' lived experiences may therefore contribute not only to consumer behavior theory but also to responsible marketing practices, financial well-being initiatives, and psychological interventions that promote healthier relationships between individuals and consumption. Against this background, the present study conceptualizes self-reward consumption as a multidimensional lived experience encompassing emotional recovery, symbolic achievement, identity construction, self-appreciation, and personal meaning. Rather than treating self-reward as a purchasing outcome, this research explores how consumers consciously experience and interpret acts of rewarding themselves throughout their everyday lives. Such a perspective positions consumption not merely as market exchange but as a meaningful psychological process through which individuals reconstruct emotional balance, reinforce personal identity, and negotiate the challenges of contemporary living. This experiential orientation provides opportunities to expand consumer behavior literature beyond conventional behavioral explanations toward richer phenomenological understandings of consumption.

The study adopts Experiential Consumption Theory as its overarching theoretical foundation, emphasizing that consumption is fundamentally an experiential phenomenon involving sensory, emotional, symbolic, and cognitive dimensions (Lanier & Rader, 2015; Oh, 2009). To enrich this perspective, the research further integrates Self-Determination Theory, explaining how self-reward fulfills psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and self-recognition; Consumer Culture

Theory, highlighting how consumption practices shape identity within contemporary cultural contexts; and Symbolic Consumption Theory, illustrating how purchased objects acquire meanings extending beyond their functional utility. The integration of these complementary perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting consumer's lived experiences of self-reward from psychological, cultural, and symbolic viewpoints. Unlike previous investigations that primarily examine self-reward through quantitative causal models, this study positions self-reward as a lived human experience explored through an interpretive phenomenological approach. The research seeks to understand how consumers construct meanings of self-appreciation, emotional restoration, and personal achievement through everyday consumption experiences. By foregrounding consumers' voices and subjective interpretations, this study contributes theoretically to experiential consumer behavior literature while providing practical implications for businesses, psychologists, and policymakers seeking to encourage more meaningful, responsible, and psychologically sustainable consumption practices in contemporary society. This study aims to explore how consumers construct the meaning of self-reward through their lived experiences in everyday consumption. Adopting an interpretive phenomenological perspective, the research seeks to understand how consumers consciously interpret self-reward as a form of perceived deservingness, emotional restoration, personal achievement, identity affirmation, and psychological well-being, thereby explaining how everyday consumption becomes a meaningful process of self-recognition beyond material acquisition. Ultimately, this study positions self-reward not merely as an act of purchasing but as a meaningful psychological and social experience through which individuals negotiate achievements, restore emotional balance, and construct a positive sense of self within the realities of contemporary everyday consumption.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical background

Contemporary consumer behavior has evolved beyond the traditional perspective that views consumption solely as a means of satisfying functional needs. Modern consumers increasingly engage in purchasing activities that fulfill emotional, psychological, and symbolic needs, making consumption an integral part of everyday life experiences. This transformation has shifted scholarly attention from product-oriented consumption toward experiential consumption, where value is derived not only from the ownership of goods but also from the emotions, memories, and meanings attached to consumption activities. Experiential Consumption Theory proposed by Morris B. Holbrook and Elizabeth C. Hirschman conceptualizes consumption as a multidimensional experience involving cognitive, emotional, sensory, and symbolic dimensions rather than merely economic exchanges (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Self-reward consumption has emerged as one of the most prominent forms of experiential consumption in contemporary society (Pookaiyadom, 2026). The concept refers to intentional purchasing behaviors undertaken as a means of celebrating accomplishments, restoring emotional balance, recognizing personal effort, or coping with everyday challenges. Unlike impulsive or compulsive buying, self-reward consumption is generally characterized by conscious reflection and perceived deservingness, whereby consumers justify purchases as expressions of self-appreciation. This perspective aligns closely with Self-Determination Theory developed, which posits that individuals seek to satisfy three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Within the context of self-reward, purchasing activities become mechanisms through which consumers acknowledge personal accomplishments, reinforce self-efficacy, and maintain psychological well-being. A self-reward purchase, therefore, functions as a symbolic representation of perseverance, resilience, or self-recognition accumulated through everyday experiences. The symbolic value of consumption allows individuals to communicate meanings to themselves as well as to others, reinforcing personal

narratives regarding success, growth, and self-worth. Accordingly, understanding self-reward requires examining not only what consumers purchase but also how they interpret those purchases as meaningful representations of their lived experiences.

Beyond its symbolic dimension, self-reward consumption is also closely connected to the cultural and social contexts in which consumers live. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) explains that consumption practices are socially and culturally constructed, with meanings continuously negotiated through interactions among individuals, communities, and broader cultural values (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Within contemporary consumer society, narratives promoting self-care, work-life balance, personal achievement, and mental well-being have increasingly normalized self-reward as a legitimate and meaningful consumption practice. Consequently, consumers interpret self-reward differently depending on their life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal values. Building upon these theoretical perspectives, the present study conceptualizes self-reward consumption as a lived experience that integrates emotional, psychological, symbolic, and cultural dimensions. Guided by these perspectives, this research focuses on two interrelated dimensions: (1) consumer's lived experiences of self-reward, encompassing emotional recovery, self-appreciation, personal achievement, and everyday meaning-making; and (2) the construction of meaning in self-reward consumption, including identity affirmation, symbolic value, psychological well-being, and personal fulfillment. Through an interpretive phenomenological approach, the study seeks to explain how consumers construct and experience the meaning of self-reward beyond material possessions, thereby extending contemporary consumer behavior literature from an experiential perspective.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

Experiential Consumption Theory as the grand theory, complemented by Self-Determination Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory, this study conceptualizes self-reward consumption as a lived experience through which consumers construct personal meanings beyond material acquisition. Accordingly, the conceptual framework is not presented as a linear input–process–output model, but as a hermeneutic meaning-making process in which lived experiences are continuously interpreted and reinterpreted through participant's reflective consciousness.

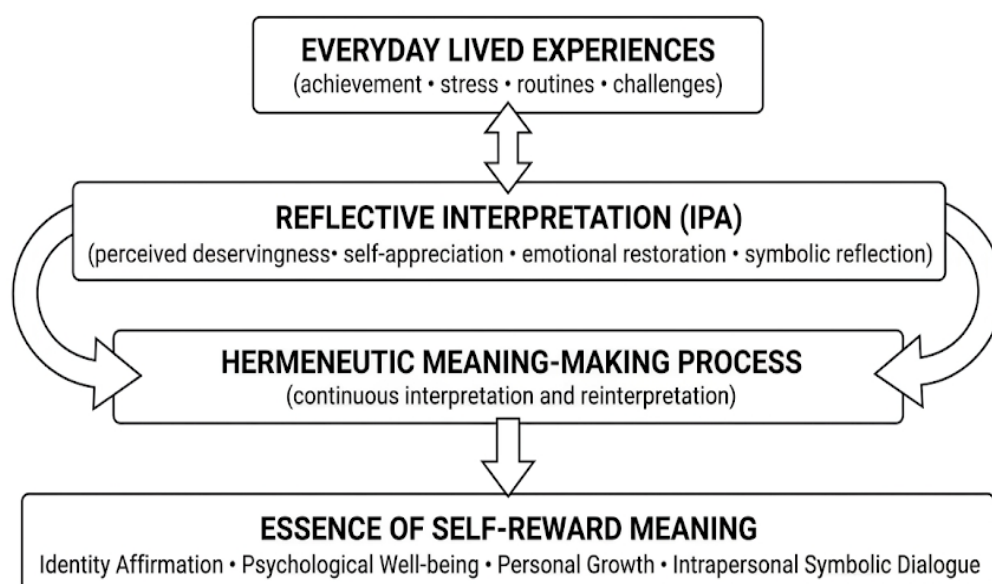


Figure 1. Hermeneutic Dynamics of Meaning Construction in Self-Reward Consumption
Source: Developed by the authors (2026)

The proposed framework illustrates a hermeneutic movement rather than a causal sequence. Consumers begin with lived experiences arising from everyday contexts, such as personal achievements, work pressures, emotional challenges, and daily routines. These experiences are then subjected to reflective interpretation, where participants consciously negotiate feelings of perceived deservingness, emotional restoration, self-appreciation, and symbolic identity. Through an ongoing hermeneutic dialogue between experience and interpretation, consumers continuously reconstruct the meaning of self-reward in light of their personal histories and life contexts. The outcome of this interpretative process is not a behavioral consequence, but the emergence of the essence of self-reward as an intrapersonal symbolic dialogue that reinforces identity, psychological well-being, and personal growth.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using an interpretive phenomenological design to explore consumer's lived experiences in constructing the meaning of self-reward in everyday consumption. Phenomenology was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals experience, interpret, and assign meaning to self-reward beyond material acquisition (Polkinghorne, 1989). Rather than viewing self-reward as a purchasing behavior, this study focuses on understanding its psychological, emotional, and symbolic meanings from consumers' subjective perspectives. The research was conducted in Makassar City, Indonesia, an urban area characterized by diverse consumer lifestyles and increasing consumption activities. Makassar represents one of Indonesia's major emerging metropolitan cities outside Java, characterized by rapid urbanization, the expansion of the middle-income population, and increasing digital consumption practices. These characteristics make Makassar a representative context for examining self-reward in a developing-country setting, where consumers simultaneously negotiate traditional socio-cultural values and contemporary consumption lifestyles. Compared with highly industrialized metropolitan areas, consumers in Makassar experience socioeconomic transitions that provide a richer context for understanding how self-reward meanings are constructed within everyday life rather than being shaped solely by mature consumer cultures. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) individuals who intentionally practiced self-reward consumption; (2) consumers with at least two years of self-reward experience; (3) residents of Makassar; and (4) individuals willing to participate in in-depth interviews. Based on these criteria, eight participants from various demographic and occupational backgrounds were recruited to provide diverse perspectives on self-reward experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, supported by observation and relevant personal documentation. Interview questions explored participants' motivations, emotional experiences, meanings attached to self-reward, perceived personal benefits, and the role of self-reward in everyday life. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Research Informants

No.	Informant Code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Self-Reward Experience	Self-Reward Activity
1	P01	Female	24	Private Employee	> 2 Years	Fashion & Beauty Purchases
2	P02	Male	29	Entrepreneur	> 3 Years	Culinary & Travel
3	P03	Female	31	Lecturer	> 4 Years	Books & Personal Development
4	P04	Female	35	Government Employee	> 5 Years	Family Vacation & Dining

5	P05	Male	27	Freelance Designer	> 2 Years	Electronic Gadgets
6	P06	Female	30	Entrepreneur	> 4 Years	Beauty Treatment & Wellness
7	P07	Male	33	Bank Employee	>5 Years	Travel & Lifestyle Products
8	P08	Female	28	University Student	> 2 Years	Fashion & Café Experiences

Source: Results of Data Processing, 2026

The interviews explored participants' understanding of self-reward, the situations that motivated self-reward consumption, emotional experiences before and after rewarding themselves, the meanings attached to purchased products or experiences, and the perceived contribution of self-reward to personal well-being and identity construction. To enrich the contextual understanding of participants' experiences, the interviews were complemented by non-participant observations focusing on participants' consumption habits and everyday lifestyle practices. In addition, relevant documentation, such as photographs, personal purchase records voluntarily shared by participants, and reflective notes, was used to support data credibility and provide contextual evidence of participants' self-reward experiences. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, ensuring that each informant possessed substantial experience with self-reward consumption. The primary research instrument was the researcher, who functioned as the human instrument responsible for collecting, interpreting, and constructing meaning from participants' narratives throughout the research process. This approach enabled the researcher to capture the richness and complexity of consumers' subjective interpretations without imposing predetermined assumptions regarding the meaning of self-reward.

The scope of this study was delimited to two interrelated dimensions. The first dimension focused on consumer's lived experiences of self-reward, including the motivations, emotional responses, personal achievements, and self-appreciation that underlie self-reward consumption. The second dimension examined the meaning construction of self-reward, emphasizing how consumers interpreted self-reward as a symbolic expression of personal identity, emotional restoration, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction. These dimensions enabled the study to capture both the experiential process and the subjective meanings consumers assign to self-reward within the context of everyday consumption. The analytical process began with repeated readings of each interview transcript to achieve immersion in the data, followed by initial coding to identify meaningful statements related to self-reward experiences. The codes were subsequently organized into emergent themes representing shared experiential patterns while preserving the uniqueness of individual narratives. Through an iterative interpretative process, higher-order conceptual themes were developed to explain how consumers construct the meaning of self-reward in their everyday lives and symbolic meanings embedded in participants' experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and continuous verification of interpretations throughout the interview process. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of participants' backgrounds and self-reward experiences, allowing readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings in similar contexts.

Table 2. Research Focus and Indicators

Research Focus	Indicators Explored
Consumers' Lived Experiences of Self-Reward	Self-appreciation; Personal achievement; Emotional recovery; Stress relief; Self-care practices; Motivation for self-reward

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in Everyday Consumption

Symbolic meaning; Identity affirmation; Psychological well-being;
Personal values; Emotional satisfaction; Meaningful consumption

Source: Developed by the Researcher based on Experiential Consumption Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory (2026).

This analytical framework was employed because it facilitates the systematic interpretation of participant's lived experiences while preserving the richness and complexity of phenomenological data. During the data condensation stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents were carefully reviewed, coded, and organized into meaningful units of analysis. Particular attention was given to participants' narratives describing the motivations, emotions, personal reflections, and symbolic meanings associated with self-reward consumption. Statements that reflected consumers' experiences of self-appreciation, emotional recovery, identity affirmation, and psychological well-being were retained, whereas information unrelated to the research objectives was excluded from further analysis.

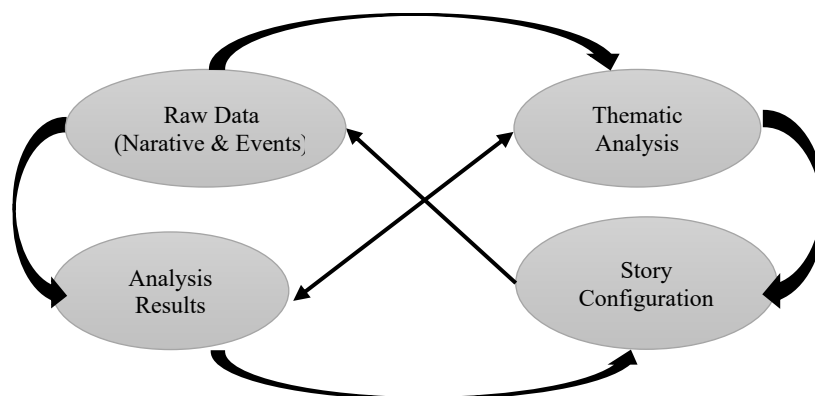


Figure 2. *Qualitative Data Analysis Technique*
Source: (Polkinghorne, 1989)

The data display stage involved organizing the condensed data into thematic matrices, narrative summaries, and conceptual maps to facilitate the identification of recurring experiential patterns across participants. This process enabled the researcher to compare individual experiences while identifying common themes concerning self-reward motivations, emotional responses, symbolic meanings, and the perceived contribution of self-reward to everyday life. The final stage consisted of conclusion drawing and verification, in which the researcher interpreted the essential meanings embedded within participants' narratives regarding self-reward consumption. Rather than focusing on purchasing behavior alone, this stage emphasized the subjective meanings consumers attached to rewarding themselves after personal achievements, overcoming life challenges, or restoring emotional balance. Emerging interpretations were continuously revisited and compared with the original interview data to ensure that the findings accurately represented participant's lived experiences and remained grounded in empirical evidence. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data verification was conducted through methodological triangulation, integrating evidence from interview transcripts, observational field notes, and supporting documentation such as personal purchase records, photographs, and reflective materials voluntarily shared by participants. In addition, member checking was undertaken by inviting participants to review and confirm the interpretations of their interview narratives. These procedures ensured that the findings authentically reflected participant's lived experiences and the meanings they attached to self-reward in everyday consumption. The analytical process was iterative and cyclical, allowing the researcher to move continuously between data collection, coding, interpretation, and

verification as new insights emerged. The study focused on two interrelated dimensions: (1) consumers's lived experiences of self-reward, encompassing motivations, emotional restoration, self-appreciation, and personal achievement; and (2) meaning construction in everyday consumption, referring to how consumers interpreted self-reward as a symbolic expression of identity, emotional well-being, and meaningful consumption. The research was limited to consumers residing in Makassar City, Indonesia, who had engaged in self-reward consumption for at least two years, enabling an in-depth phenomenological exploration of how individuals construct the meaning of self-reward within the context of everyday life.

4. RESULTS

This study explores consumer's lived experiences of self-reward consumption to uncover the underlying meanings that individuals construct through everyday purchasing practices. The findings are derived from in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and supporting documentation, providing a comprehensive understanding of how consumers experience, interpret, and assign meaning to self-reward beyond material acquisition. Participants' narratives reveal that self-reward is not merely an act of purchasing products or services but a meaningful experiential process closely associated with self-appreciation, emotional restoration, personal achievement, and identity affirmation. Through a phenomenological interpretation, the findings demonstrate how consumers construct the meaning of self-reward as a psychological, emotional, and symbolic practice that contributes to their overall well-being and everyday life experiences.

Table 3. Summary of Interview Results

Research Focus	Emergent Theme	Essence of Participants' Experience	Representative Quote
Consumers' Lived Experiences of Self-Reward	Self-Appreciation	Participants perceived self-reward as a conscious acknowledgment of their own efforts and achievements rather than a form of luxury consumption.	"Self-reward reminds me that I deserve recognition for my own efforts, even if nobody else notices them." (P02)
	Emotional Restoration	Self-reward functioned as an intentional strategy to restore emotional balance after work-related pressure or daily stress.	"Self-reward helps me recover emotionally after experiencing pressure at work." (P01)
	Personal Achievement	Participants attached symbolic value to self-reward because it represented milestones in their personal journey.	"The reward itself is less important than what it represents." (P04)
Meaning Construction of Self-Reward	Identity Affirmation	Self-reward strengthened participants' sense of identity by reinforcing personal values and self-recognition.	"The things I choose for self-reward represent who I am." (P03)
	Psychological Well-Being	Participants experienced self-reward as contributing to lasting emotional well-being rather than temporary pleasure.	"The meaning I gain is more valuable than what I buy." (P08)

Source: Results of Data Processing, 2026

4.1. Self-Appreciation as Conscious Self-Recognition

Self-appreciation emerged as the most prominent lived experience across participants. Rather than perceiving self-reward as an expression of luxury or excessive consumption, participants consistently interpreted it as a conscious acknowledgment of their own efforts after achieving personally meaningful goals. This experience is reflected in the following statement:

"Self-reward reminds me that I deserve recognition for my own efforts, even if nobody else notices them." (P02)

This quotation reveals that the participant does not rely on external validation to appreciate personal achievements. Instead, recognition is experienced as an internal process through which the individual consciously affirms the value of his own effort. From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, self-reward becomes an intrapersonal symbolic dialogue, where purchasing is not primarily directed toward obtaining material possessions but toward legitimizing one's personal journey. The meaning of consumption therefore emerges from reflective awareness that one's efforts deserve appreciation, illustrating the element of perceived deservingness identified across participants' narratives.

A similar meaning was expressed by another participant:

"For me, self-reward is not about luxury but about acknowledging my own progress." (P05)

This narrative further demonstrates that participants differentiated self-reward from materialistic consumption. The purchased object was considered secondary, while the symbolic acknowledgment of personal progress became the central meaning of the experience. Thus, the phenomenological essence of self-reward lies in conscious self-recognition rather than the acquisition of products themselves.

4.2. Emotional Restoration as a Reflective Coping Experience

Beyond self-appreciation, participants consistently described self-reward as a means of restoring emotional balance after experiencing work-related pressure, academic demands, or personal challenges. Rather than functioning as an impulsive reaction, self-reward was interpreted as a deliberate practice for emotional recovery. One participant explained:

"Self-reward helps me recover emotionally after experiencing pressure at work." (P01)

Likewise, another participant stated:

"Traveling for a short holiday allows me to recharge both mentally and emotionally." (P02)

These narratives indicate that emotional restoration was experienced as a reflective process rather than an immediate emotional escape. Participants consciously evaluated their emotional condition before deciding to reward themselves, suggesting that self-reward functioned as an intentional strategy for psychological recovery. From a phenomenological perspective, the meaning of self-reward resides not in the purchased experience itself but in the renewed sense of emotional equilibrium that follows reflective self-care. Consequently, consumption becomes a medium through which individuals restore their relationship with themselves amid the pressures of everyday life.

4.3. Personal Achievement as Symbolic Recognition of Life Progress

Participants also interpreted self-reward as a symbolic representation of personal achievement. The meaning of the purchased object was consistently associated with the journey leading to the achievement rather than with its material value. As one participant expressed:

"The reward itself is less important than what it represents." (P04)

Another participant similarly explained:

"I associate self-reward with personal growth rather than material ownership." (P06)

These accounts demonstrate that participants attached symbolic meanings to consumption experiences by connecting them with personal milestones and achievements. From an interpretative phenomenological standpoint, self-reward serves as a symbolic marker that allows individuals to preserve meaningful memories of their accomplishments. The purchase therefore functions as an

embodiment of perseverance and personal development rather than an expression of consumption for its own sake.

4.4. Identity Affirmation through Everyday Consumption

Identity affirmation emerged as another essential meaning of self-reward. Participants perceived their self-reward choices as reflections of their personal values and evolving identities rather than attempts to obtain social recognition. One participant stated:

"The things I choose for self-reward represent who I am." (P03)

Another participant reflected:

"Self-reward reflects my personal values, not other people's expectations." (P02)

These quotations illustrate that participants experienced self-reward as an opportunity to reaffirm their authentic selves. Rather than consuming to impress others, they interpreted consumption as an expression of self-consistency and personal identity. The phenomenological interpretation suggests that self-reward becomes a process through which individuals continuously negotiate and reinforce their self-concept through meaningful consumption experiences.

4.5. Psychological Well-Being as the Essence of Self-Reward

The final theme indicates that participants ultimately experienced self-reward as contributing to enduring psychological well-being. The emotional benefits derived from self-reward were perceived as more meaningful than the purchased products themselves.

One participant explained:

"The emotional benefit lasts longer than the product itself." (P07)

Similarly, another participant stated:

"The meaning I gain is more valuable than what I buy." (P08)

These narratives suggest that participants did not evaluate self-reward based on economic value but on its capacity to generate lasting emotional meaning. Through repeated reflection, consumption became integrated into participants' broader life stories, reinforcing optimism, resilience, and personal well-being. From a phenomenological perspective, this finding demonstrates that the essence of self-reward is not consumption itself but the construction of meaningful psychological experiences that enable individuals to maintain emotional balance and affirm their sense of self.

The interview findings indicate that self-reward consumption is a multidimensional lived experience that extends far beyond the acquisition of material goods or services. Across all participants, self-reward was consistently interpreted as a meaningful practice of recognizing personal effort, celebrating achievements, restoring emotional balance, and reaffirming one's identity. Although participants differed in terms of age, occupation, and preferred forms of self-reward, their narratives revealed common experiential patterns emphasizing that the value of self-reward lies primarily in the psychological and symbolic meanings attached to the experience rather than in the monetary value of the purchased products or services. These findings suggest that self-reward functions as an important mechanism through which consumers maintain emotional resilience, enhance self-appreciation, and construct a more positive sense of self within the context of everyday consumption. Furthermore, the thematic patterns emerging from participants' narratives demonstrate that the meaning of self-reward is constructed through a continuous process of personal reflection and everyday life experiences. Consumers perceived self-reward as an intentional practice that

supports emotional well-being, strengthens personal identity, and reinforces motivation to pursue future goals. These recurring experiential dimensions provide the foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis, which discusses each emergent theme in greater depth through the lens of Experiential Consumption Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory. The following sections present a detailed interpretation of these themes to explain how consumers construct the meaning of self-reward in their everyday consumption experiences.

5. DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that self-reward is fundamentally interpreted as a form of self-appreciation rather than an expression of materialism or excessive consumption. Across participants, self-reward emerged as a meaningful acknowledgment of personal effort, perseverance, and achievement accumulated through everyday life experiences. Consumers described rewarding themselves not merely to acquire products or services but to recognize their own accomplishments and reinforce positive self-perceptions. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies reporting that self-reward functions as a mechanism for enhancing self-esteem and recognizing personal achievements rather than satisfying purely hedonic desires (Al-Issa, 2024; Bhardwaj & Sharma, 2025c; Novino et al., 2024). However, the present research extends these behavioral explanations by demonstrating that self-reward is experienced as a deeply personal and reflective process through which consumers construct meanings about themselves. From the perspective of Experiential Consumption Theory (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982) consumption is understood as an experiential activity in which emotional and symbolic values frequently exceed functional product attributes. Accordingly, the value of self-reward lies not in ownership itself but in the lived experience of acknowledging one's own efforts and achievements. This perspective broadens the theoretical understanding of consumption by positioning self-reward as an experiential process of personal meaning construction rather than merely a purchasing activity. Participants consistently described self-reward as a strategy for relieving stress, recovering emotional energy, and restoring psychological balance after demanding work, academic responsibilities, or personal challenges. Such experiences support earlier studies indicating that consumption often functions as an emotion-focused coping strategy capable of improving mood and psychological well-being (Majid et al., 2026; Widiartini et al., 2025). In contrast, several scholars argue that emotionally driven consumption may encourage impulsive buying behavior and eventually create financial difficulties when consumers rely excessively on purchasing as a coping mechanism (Akın, 2026; Jabutay & Limpachote, 2024; Wan et al., 2024). Participants in this study, however, described self-reward as a deliberate and carefully considered decision that reflected personal achievements rather than spontaneous emotional reactions. This distinction suggests that self-reward should be differentiated conceptually from impulsive or compulsive buying. Such an interpretation aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) which explains that behaviors satisfying the needs for autonomy and competence contribute to psychological well-being. In this context, self-reward becomes an intrinsic form of self-recognition that strengthens emotional resilience while maintaining personal balance.

Participants consistently perceived purchased products and experiences as symbols of personal growth, resilience, and achievement rather than objects possessing value solely because of their material characteristics. For many participants, the significance of self-reward originated from what the purchase represented within their personal life stories instead of its economic value. This interpretation is consistent with Symbolic Consumption Theory, which argues that consumers use products and consumption experiences to communicate meanings about themselves, reinforce identities, and express personal values. Previous research similarly suggests that symbolic consumption enables individuals to construct and communicate self-identity through marketplace

choices (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Nevertheless, earlier studies have frequently emphasized symbolic consumption as a means of obtaining social recognition and enhancing public image. Participants in the present study presented a different perspective, describing self-reward as an internal symbolic dialogue rather than a form of social display. The narratives further illustrate that self-reward contributes to identity construction and psychological well-being through an ongoing process of meaning-making embedded in everyday consumption. Participants explained that rewarding themselves strengthened self-confidence, reinforced their sense of identity, and encouraged them to pursue future goals with greater optimism. Similar observations have been reported within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which views consumption as a cultural practice through which individuals negotiate identities, values, and life narratives in contemporary society (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). While numerous studies portray consumer culture as encouraging excessive consumption and materialistic lifestyles, participants demonstrated that they actively negotiated these cultural influences according to their own experiences, priorities, and values. From a practical perspective, the results suggest that organizations and marketers should shift their focus from emphasizing prestige and product ownership toward creating meaningful consumption experiences that acknowledge consumers' achievements, emotional needs, and personal development.

The patterns emerging across all interviews suggest that the meaning of self-reward is constructed through a continuous interaction between personal experiences, emotional reflection, and everyday consumption practices. Rather than being associated with luxury or excessive spending, self-reward was interpreted as an intentional activity that allows individuals to recognize achievements, regulate emotions, and reaffirm personal values. Such an interpretation broadens the discussion within consumer behavior literature, which has traditionally emphasized utilitarian and hedonic motivations as the dominant drivers of consumption. More importantly, the findings demonstrate that self-reward is conceptually distinct from other consumption phenomena such as impulsive buying, emotional spending, retail therapy, or compulsive buying. Unlike these forms of consumption, which are often driven by immediate affective responses or uncontrolled purchasing impulses, self-reward in this study emerged from a process of conscious reflection in which individuals first evaluated their efforts, accomplishments, or personal struggles before deciding that they genuinely deserved a reward. This element of perceived deservingness represents the core experiential characteristic of self-reward, transforming consumption into an intentional act of self-recognition rather than a temporary emotional escape. Consequently, participants did not perceive self-reward as a mechanism for avoiding negative emotions, but as a meaningful symbolic practice through which achievements were acknowledged, emotional balance was restored, and personal identity was reaffirmed. This perspective strengthens Experiential Consumption Theory by illustrating that consumption experiences are shaped not only by sensory enjoyment but also by the meanings consumers attach to significant moments in their lives. Comparison with previous studies reveals both convergence and divergence. Earlier research has consistently reported that self-reward contributes to happiness, stress reduction, and increased life satisfaction (Hu & Zhao, 2025; Kristiani & Tyas, 2025; Ștefan & Vîrgă, 2025). The present study offers a more nuanced interpretation by showing that the consequences of self-reward depend largely on the meanings attached to the practice rather than on the act of purchasing itself. Consumers who viewed self-reward as recognition of effort and personal achievement tended to describe positive emotional and psychological outcomes, whereas the symbolic value of the experience was considered more important than the product acquired.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to consumer behavior research by integrating Experiential Consumption Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory within a single phenomenological framework. Previous studies generally examined these perspectives separately, focusing either on emotional consumption,

symbolic products, psychological motivation, or cultural consumption practices. Bringing these theories together demonstrates that self-reward is a multidimensional phenomenon involving intrinsic motivation, symbolic identity, emotional restoration, and meaning construction simultaneously. This integration enriches the conceptual understanding of self-reward by positioning it as a meaningful experiential process rather than a simple market transaction. The study therefore extends existing literature by emphasizing that the psychological value of consumption is created through interpretation and reflection rather than through ownership alone. Several practical implications also emerge from the analysis. For marketers, the narratives suggest that consumers increasingly appreciate products and services capable of supporting meaningful life experiences instead of merely offering functional benefits or status-related attributes. Marketing strategies that emphasize personal achievement, self-care, emotional well-being, and authentic life stories may resonate more strongly with contemporary consumers than conventional promotional messages centered on luxury or prestige. These insights not only expand theoretical discussions within consumer research but also offer practical directions for organizations seeking to create more meaningful consumer experiences. The subsequent section concludes the study by summarizing the principal contributions, acknowledging its limitations, and outlining opportunities for future research.

The findings of this study contribute to the advancement of experiential consumer behavior literature by demonstrating that self-reward should be understood not merely as a hedonic consumption practice but as a reflective meaning-making process grounded in perceived deservingness and conscious self-recognition. Unlike previous studies that predominantly conceptualize self-reward as a behavioral outcome driven by hedonic motivation or emotional consumption, this phenomenological study reveals that consumers construct the meaning of self-reward through an intrapersonal symbolic dialogue linking personal achievements, emotional restoration, identity affirmation, and psychological well-being. These findings extend Experiential Consumption Theory by showing that consumption experiences are constituted through reflective interpretation rather than immediate emotional gratification. Furthermore, the integration of Experiential Consumption Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory provides a more comprehensive framework for explaining how consumers assign meaning to everyday consumption within contemporary cultural contexts. This study also offers a conceptual distinction between self-reward and other forms of emotion-driven consumption, such as impulsive buying, retail therapy, and compulsive buying, by highlighting conscious reflection and perceived deservingness as defining characteristics of self-reward.

The findings suggest that consumers respond more positively to marketing narratives that acknowledge the effort behind personal accomplishments than to messages encouraging spontaneous or excessive consumption. Consequently, ethical marketing campaigns should position self-reward as a conscious celebration of meaningful milestones rather than as an impulsive solution to negative emotions. Practically, companies can incorporate these findings into campaign strategies by developing storytelling-based communications that celebrate consumers' personal journeys, creating milestone-oriented promotional programs (graduation, career achievement, wellness goals, or personal development), and designing customer experiences that reinforce emotional well-being rather than material acquisition. Such strategies enable firms to establish deeper emotional connections with consumers while promoting responsible and psychologically sustainable consumption. Beyond commercial applications, the findings also provide broader social implications by encouraging a more balanced understanding of consumption. Self-reward should be promoted as an intentional form of self-appreciation grounded in reflection and perceived deservingness, rather than as a justification for uncontrolled spending. In this way, organizations can contribute not only to stronger customer relationships but also to more ethical and meaningful consumption practices that support consumers' long-term psychological well-being.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that self-reward is a meaningful experiential practice that extends beyond the acquisition of products or services, serving as a form of self-appreciation, emotional restoration, personal achievement, identity affirmation, and psychological well-being. Through an interpretive phenomenological approach, consumers were found to construct the meaning of self-reward based on their lived experiences rather than on the material value of the purchased items. The study enriches consumer behavior literature by integrating Experiential Consumption Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory, illustrating that self-reward is a multidimensional phenomenon in which emotional, symbolic, and psychological values are intertwined. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of everyday consumption by emphasizing that consumers increasingly seek meaningful experiences that support personal growth and emotional balance rather than merely fulfilling functional or hedonic needs.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a relatively small number of participants in Makassar City, Indonesia, limiting the transferability of the findings to other cultural and demographic contexts. In addition, the research focused primarily on consumers' subjective experiences without considering variations across socioeconomic backgrounds, generational differences, or specific product categories that may shape the meaning of self-reward differently. Future studies are therefore encouraged to explore self-reward experiences in diverse cultural settings, compare different consumer segments, or adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to examine how the meaning of self-reward evolves over time. Such investigations would further strengthen the theoretical development of experiential consumption and provide deeper insights into the role of self-reward in contemporary consumer life.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This study advances consumer behavior literature by demonstrating that self-reward consumption operates as a multidimensional, experiential practice rather than a mere purchasing outcome or impulse buying trigger. By integrating Experiential Consumption Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory into a unified interpretative framework, this research illustrates how consumers assign deeply subjective meanings to everyday consumption. It extends traditional views on symbolic consumption by showing that symbolic value can emerge through an intrapersonal, reflective dialogue where the product serves as a symbol of personal perseverance and self-appreciation rather than purely as an interpersonal display for social status. From a practical and managerial standpoint, these insights encourage businesses, brand strategists, and marketers to rethink their customer engagement models. Brands operating in lifestyle, wellness, tourism, fashion, and personal care can design products and service narratives that celebrate personal milestones, self-care, and emotional restoration. By aligning marketing messaging with themes of personal growth, resilience, and deserved self-recognition, organizations can foster deeper, emotionally resonant relationships with contemporary consumers. From a societal perspective, this study provides valuable insights into promoting psychological well-being and responsible consumerism. It positions self-reward as an effective coping mechanism and emotional restoration practice that helps individuals manage modern work stress and lifestyle pressures. However, by highlighting that the core value of self-reward resides in subjective meaning and emotional reflection rather than financial expenditure or material accumulation, the findings offer a foundation for financial literacy and mental health initiatives. Public policy makers and wellness advocates can leverage these insights to encourage conscious, intentional self-care practices that support psychological resilience while safeguarding consumers against overconsumption, impulsive buying, and financial strain.

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