

Phyigital Onboarding and Institutional Choice: A Thematic Study of Generation Z's Perceptions in Postgraduate Management Education

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the aspirations and decision-making processes of Generation Z students in selecting postgraduate management institutions, with a specific focus on onboarding experiences that integrate both digital and physical i.e. phyigital elements. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with undergraduate students in Pune, India, the study applies reflexive thematic analysis to identify key themes. Five overarching themes emerged: Career-Centric Motivations, Digital and Phyigital Integration, Peer-Based Information Ecosystems, Institutional Value Signals, and Experiential Learning Expectations. The findings reveal that Generation Z students prioritize personalized, value-aligned, and technologically rich educational experiences. Phyigital onboarding, when effectively executed, plays a critical role in shaping their engagement and institutional choice. The study concludes with implications for education leaders and curriculum designers seeking to develop inclusive, tech-enabled, and career-oriented onboarding strategies.

Keywords: Generation Z, postgraduate education, phyigital onboarding, thematic analysis, higher education decision-making, student engagement

1. Introduction

Postgraduate management education is experiencing a fundamental reconfiguration, propelled by shifting learner expectations, the rapid integration of digital technology, and intensifying competition among institutions.(Sethi Inder Pal Singh, 2024) At the forefront of this shift is Generation Z—those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s—whose educational preferences and decision-making processes differ markedly from previous cohorts (A. B. Mishra, 2025c) As digitally native learners, Generation Z brings a heightened demand for technological integration, personalized experiences, and value-aligned educational pathways (Mohseni et al., 2022)Their approach to selecting institutions is not solely influenced by prestige or marketing but by a constellation of factors that include career relevance, institutional transparency, and digital engagement. Within this evolving educational ecosystem, student onboarding traditionally associated with basic orientation programs has taken on new significance. Increasingly, onboarding is seen as a strategic engagement tool, designed not only to facilitate initial transitions but to establish long-term student-institution rapport.(A. B. Mishra et al., 2023) The emergence of “phyigital onboarding”, which merges physical interaction with digital touchpoints, reflects this trend. Such hybrid models incorporate technologies like AI-driven communication, virtual campus tours, live webinars, and peer community platforms, offering an immersive pre-enrollment experience (A. B. Mishra et al., 2024)These innovations function as both operational utilities and institutional identity markers, signaling the institution’s adaptability, relevance, and student-centric ethos.

This transformation is particularly salient in the Indian context, where the exponential growth of management institutions over the last two decades has generated both opportunity and oversupply. Students are now faced with a saturated market of programs with varying levels of quality, placement outcomes, and pedagogical relevance.(Mohseni et al., 2022) In such a competitive environment, institutions can no longer rely solely on

reputation or advertising. Instead, they must create engagement ecosystems that reflect the lived realities and expectations of digitally empowered students.(Rana et al., 2022)

Although recent literature has begun to address Generation Z's digital preferences and the importance of early engagement, there is a notable gap in qualitative research that explores how students interpret onboarding experiences particularly phygital onboarding in non-Western, emerging market contexts such as India. Much of the current discourse remains quantitative or conceptual, lacking the rich narrative insight that can inform policy and practice at an institutional level.(Rao, 2016)

This study addresses that gap by exploring the perceptions and expectations of Generation Z students in Pune, India, who are preparing to pursue postgraduate management education. It specifically examines how onboarding strategies—especially those leveraging hybrid digital-physical platforms influence students' decision-making, institutional trust, and sense of fit. (Kate et al., 2022)Through a thematic analysis of interviews and focus group data, the study aims to offer practical, theory-informed insights that can support the development of effective, inclusive, and future-ready onboarding frameworks in higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generation Z and Higher Education

Generation Z exhibits unique educational values compared to previous cohorts. They emphasize customization, digital fluency, and alignment with personal values like sustainability and inclusivity (A. B. Mishra et al., 2025)These values shape how they engage with institutional information and onboarding practices.

2.2 The Role of Onboarding

Traditionally associated with corporate settings, onboarding in education has expanded to encompass hybrid orientation, pre-enrolment digital engagement, and community-building efforts (A. B. Mishra, 2025a) Studies now argue that onboarding is critical not only for early retention but also for shaping long-term institutional loyalty.(Pooja Mehta et al., 2021)

2.3 The Emergence of “Phygital” Experience

Phygital approaches—where digital tools enhance physical engagement—are transforming how institutions interact with prospective students. Virtual campus tours, AI-based Q&A platforms, and hybrid orientation events are seen as enablers of deeper engagement (A. B. Mishra, 2020) Despite these advances, limited empirical work has qualitatively examined the lived experiences of Gen Z during onboarding. This study addresses that gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative, interpretive approach, drawing from a constructivist paradigm (D'Cruze Danny, 2023). It employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to collect narrative data from participants.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

A purposive sample of 25 final-year undergraduate students from diverse disciplines was selected from the Pune district. Three focus groups (n = 5–7) supplemented the interviews. The inclusion criteria were being a final-year undergraduate, considering postgraduate management education, and willingness to reflect on onboarding experiences.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection included interviews and focus groups lasting 40–60 minutes. Key prompts addressed institutional trust, motivations for MBA/PGDM, digital touchpoints, and onboarding experiences. All recordings were transcribed verbatim.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process was both inductive and deductive, allowing for both data-driven insights and alignment with literature. NVivo 14 was used to manage data. Credibility was ensured through peer debriefing and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Theme 1: Career-Centric Motivations

Students viewed management education primarily as a career accelerator. Motivation stemmed from aspirations for upward mobility, leadership roles, and entrepreneurial ventures. This aligns with Chillakuri’s (2020) findings that Gen Z seeks education aligned with measurable professional benefits.

4.2 Theme 2: Digital and Phygital Integration

Participants emphasized that seamless digital experiences—such as AI chatbots, virtual tours, and interactive webinars—were not merely conveniences but indicators of institutional quality. These phygital interactions-built trust and accessibility.(A. B. Mishra & Darshi, 2025)

4.3 Theme 3: Peer-Based Information Ecosystems

Students reported greater reliance on peer recommendations, alumni feedback, and social media groups over institutional advertisements. This decentralized, community-led validation process is consistent with findings by Seyfi et al. (2024) and Joshi et al. (2019).

4.4 Theme 4: Institutional Value Signals

Participants were attentive to factors such as placement records, teaching pedagogy, and industry partnerships. These were interpreted as institutional “signals” indicating the potential for career growth (A. B. Mishra, 2025d)

4.5 Theme 5: Experiential Learning Expectations

Hands-on experiences such as internships, simulations, and live projects were deemed essential. Students sought education that mirrored real-world challenges, aligning with Usman et al. (2023) and Mishra & Ranjan (2022).

5. Conceptual Model

The ICE-P Model (Integrated Choice Experience–Perception Model) theorizes that Generation Z’s decision to engage with and enroll in a management institution is shaped by the interaction between personal motivations, onboarding experiences, peer influence, perceived institutional signals, and experiential validation.(A. B. Mishra & Dodke, 2024) This model proposes a multi-layered pathway moving from inner cognitive drivers to external validation systems through which onboarding impacts institutional choice and engagement.

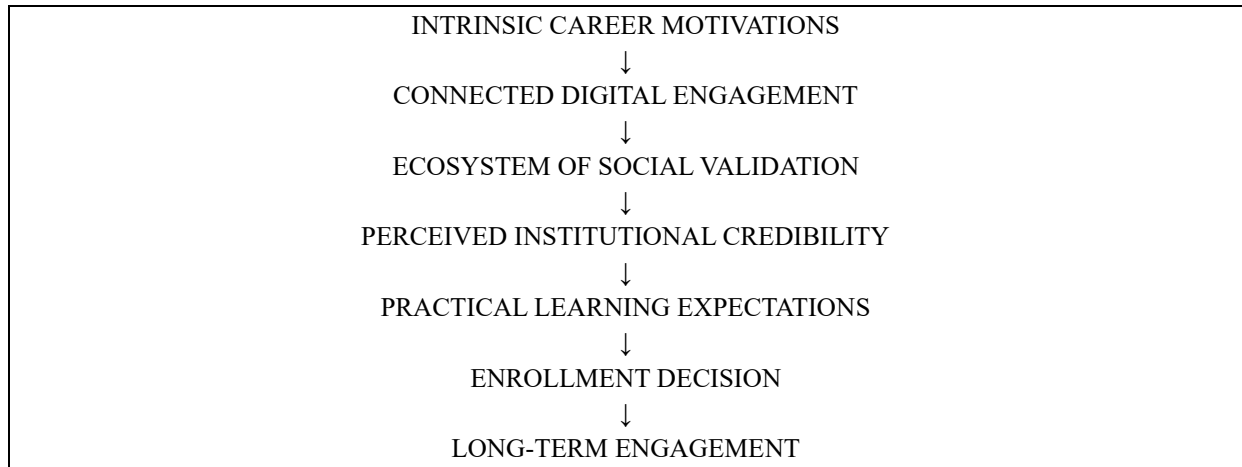
Model Dimensions and Description:

Component	Definition	Origin from Findings
I – Intrinsic Career Motivations	The internal desire for professional growth, income, leadership, or entrepreneurship	Theme 1: Career-Centric Motivations
C – Connected Digital Engagement	The extent to which digital and phygital interactions create trust, access, and personalization	Theme 2: Digital and Phygital Integration
E – Ecosystem of Social Validation	The informal network of peers, alumni, and social media that influence student decisions	Theme 3: Peer-Based Information Ecosystems
P1 – Perceived Institutional Credibility	Student interpretation of institutional quality based on observable value signals	Theme 4: Institutional Value Signals
P2 – Practical Learning Expectations	Expectation for hands-on experiences that confirm value and enhance employability	Theme 5: Experiential Learning Expectations

Model :-

The Gen Z ICE-P Model: Integrated Choice Experience–Perception Framework for Postgraduate Education

Model Flow:



Model Explanation:

1. Career aspirations (I) activate the search for relevant institutions.
2. Phygital onboarding (C) builds initial awareness and emotional trust.
3. Peer ecosystems (E) validate or challenge perceptions formed in digital interactions.
4. Perceived value (P1) is crystallized through institutional signals like placements, faculty, and branding.
5. Experiential expectations (P2) provide the final evaluative layer—students seek assurance through projects, internships, and industry tie-ups before committing.
6. The convergence of these factors drives the decision to enroll, and satisfaction of these expectations leads to sustained engagement.

Theoretical Contributions:

- **Originality:** This model synthesizes behavioral, social, and experiential learning dimensions into a unified onboarding framework, unlike TAM, SERVQUAL, or Tinto’s student integration models.
- **Practicality:** It directly informs institutional strategies for personalized digital onboarding, peer engagement, and program design.
- **Generational Relevance:** Specifically tailored for Generation Z, addressing their tech-native, socially influenced, and value-oriented profile.

6. Discussion

Thematic analysis of participant narratives revealed five core dimensions shaping Generation Z’s expectations and decisions in postgraduate management education.(A. Mishra, 2025) To synthesize these findings into a coherent framework, this study proposes the ICE-P Model—Integrated Choice Experience Perception Model which captures the dynamic interaction between career motivations, digital engagement, peer influence, institutional perception, and experiential assurance.(Mohammed Usman et al., 2023)

This model advances prior frameworks by cantering the onboarding experience within a socially validated, digitally mediated, and value-driven decision-making process.(Henderson et al., 1998) It responds directly to calls in the literature to move beyond linear decision models (e.g., marketing funnel theories or transactional onboarding) and instead adopt student-centered, multi-influence perspectives (A. B. Mishra, 2025b)

6.1 Career Aspirations as Motivational Baseline

The model positions Intrinsic Career Motivations (I) as the catalyst for institutional search. This aligns with participant emphasis on employability, leadership potential, (Manoharan et al., 2024) and future security core features previously reported by (Chillakuri, 2020). Students begin their decision-making process with a clear expectation of personal and professional advancement.

6.2 Digital and Phygital Engagement as Trust Builders

Connected Digital Engagement (C), the second component, reflects how phygital onboarding tools function as *trust enablers*. Participants associated AI chatbots, virtual tours, and hybrid induction programs with not just convenience but institutional credibility supported. (A. B. Mishra & Singh Ritika, 2024) These platforms initiate an emotional connection, which influences further exploration.

6.3 Peer Validation as Decision Filter

The third stage, Ecosystem of Social Validation (E), highlights the importance of peer influence in institutional selection. Participants frequently turned to WhatsApp groups, Instagram testimonials, and alumni feedback, affirming (A. B. Mishra & Singh, 2024) argument that peer ecosystems act as decentralized validators of institutional claims.

6.4 Value Signals and Experiential Expectations as Decisive Layers

The fourth and fifth dimensions—Perceived Institutional Value Signals (P1) and Practical Learning Expectations (P2)—function as final decision filters. Students assess institutional quality based on placements, pedagogy, and faculty reputation (P1), and then validate their impressions through expectations of internships, live projects, and real-world exposure (P2). This affirms research by Usman et al. (2023) and Mishra & Ranjan (2022), who emphasize the centrality of experiential learning in Generation Z's decision-making.

6.5 Model Implications

By structurally integrating these five domains, the ICE-P Model offers a novel and actionable framework for institutions. It proposes that onboarding is not a single point of contact, but a cumulative process involving digital interfaces, social feedback loops, and perceived alignment with career goals and educational quality. (Ahamad et al., 2024)

This model underscores the need for higher education institutions to invest not only in technology but also in peer-driven platforms, value transparency, and experiential program design, particularly when engaging Gen Z applicants.

7. Conclusion

This study explored how Generation Z students interpret their onboarding experiences and make decisions about postgraduate management education. Through qualitative inquiry, five interconnected themes were identified: career motivation, digital engagement, peer influence, institutional value signaling, and experiential expectations. (Vrontis et al., 2021) To integrate these insights, the study proposes the ICE-P Model, a novel conceptual framework that outlines the multi-layered decision-making process of Gen Z students. (Saarijärvi et al., 2013) Unlike traditional models that view student choice as a rational or marketing-driven behavior, ICE-P recognizes the emotional, technological, social, and value-based complexity of student engagement. The model contributes to both theory and practice. Academically, it expands the discourse on onboarding by introducing a holistic, generation-specific framework rooted in lived experience. (Usman M et al., 2023) Practically, it provides institutional leaders (A. B. Mishra et al., 2022) with a diagnostic tool to assess and enhance their onboarding systems—ensuring that digital platforms, (Ranjan et al., 2023) peer communities, and academic programs align with the priorities of digitally fluent, career-oriented students. In an era of intense competition and changing student expectations, adopting the ICE-P model can help institutions reframe onboarding from an administrative task to a strategic engagement opportunity, ultimately improving student recruitment, retention, and long-term loyalty.

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