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Is Price Still King? Exploring What Really Drives Consumers to Choose Mobile Operator SIM Cards in Batam, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study explores the key factors influencing consumer decisions when purchasing mobile operator SIM cards in Batam, Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, perceptions were gathered from diverse community segments, including students, homemakers, private-sector employees, and government staff. The findings indicate that price remains the most dominant determinant across groups, followed by promotional strategies. Customer experience, particularly network quality and service interaction, plays a supporting but less decisive role. The study suggests that telecom providers in emerging urban markets should prioritize competitive pricing structures, targeted promotions, and continuous service quality improvements to strengthen consumer acquisition and retention.

Keyword: Consumer Decision-Making, Price Perception, Sales Promotion, Customer Experience, Telecommunications.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally reshaped how societies interact, conduct business, and maintain social connections, positioning mobile communication services as an essential component of everyday life (Philip Kotler & Keller, 2016). In highly connected urban environments, mobile phones are no longer viewed as luxury goods but as critical infrastructure that supports economic participation, educational access, and social integration. This transformation has intensified competition among mobile network operators, compelling firms to continuously refine pricing strategies, promotional tactics, and service quality to attract and retain increasingly discerning users (Andaleeb & Hasan, 2016).

Batam, Indonesia, provides a particularly compelling context for examining telecommunications consumption behavior. As a strategic industrial hub and border city with high levels of labor mobility and digital engagement, Batam represents a rapidly developing urban market where consumers are exposed to multiple operator choices. In such competitive settings, purchasing decisions are not determined solely by functional needs but are strongly influenced by perceived value, affordability, and the intensity of marketing communications (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Among the various determinants of consumer choice, price perception continues to play a central role, especially in emerging markets characterized by diverse income levels and spending priorities. Price does not merely represent a financial sacrifice; it also serves as a psychological indicator of fairness and value (Xia et al., 2004). Consumers frequently compare tariff plans, data quotas, and bonus offerings before selecting a provider, suggesting that affordability and perceived price fairness significantly shape decision outcomes (Abidin et al., 2023). This behavior highlights the ongoing relevance of price as both an economic and cognitive factor in consumer evaluation processes.

Beyond pricing considerations, sales promotions function as a powerful strategic tool influencing short-term purchase decisions and encouraging brand switching. Promotional instruments such as bonus internet quotas, limited-time discounts, and bundled service packages offer additional utilitarian and emotional benefits that can temporarily override long-term loyalty considerations (Blattberg & Neslin, 1990; Chandon et al., 2000). In the telecommunications industry, where technical service differences are often difficult for consumers to assess, promotions become a highly visible and persuasive competitive mechanism.

Another important factor shaping purchasing decisions is customer experience, which encompasses consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses throughout their interactions with a service provider. Within the telecommunications context, customer experience includes perceptions of network reliability, internet speed, responsiveness of customer service, and the efficiency of problem resolution (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Although customer experience may not always drive the initial purchase decision, it plays a critical role in shaping satisfaction, trust, and word-of-mouth communication over time, thereby influencing longer-term loyalty.

Consumer decision-making in telecommunications is also embedded within broader social and psychological contexts. Students and working individuals, for instance, often balance cost considerations with the need for reliable connectivity to support academic tasks and professional responsibilities (Robbins, 2010; Rockman et al., 2022). The growing integration of digital technologies into daily routines, ranging from online learning and remote communication to digital work practices, further increases dependence on stable yet affordable mobile data services used not only for communication but also for digital learning and online economic activities (Sun et al., 2023; Yusriani et al., 2025; Harisandi et al., 2024). These contextual pressures intensify the trade-off consumers face between price affordability and service performance.

Despite the rapid growth of Indonesia's telecommunications sector, relatively limited scholarly attention has been given to how diverse urban consumer segments evaluate SIM card options in secondary yet strategically important cities such as Batam. Existing studies tend to focus either on technological adoption or general service satisfaction, leaving a gap in understanding how pricing, promotions, and customer experience interact simultaneously to influence purchasing decisions at the consumer level.

Accordingly, this study poses the following central question: Is price still the dominant driver, or do promotional strategies and customer experience increasingly shape SIM card purchase decisions in Batam? By examining perceptions across multiple consumer segments, this research aims to offer a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of telecommunications consumer behavior in a competitive emerging urban market.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as the primary data collection method. A qualitative approach was chosen to explore in depth how consumers interpret, negotiate, and justify their SIM card purchasing decisions

within their daily social and family contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Ketaren et al., 2023). This design allows researchers to capture shared meanings and contrasting perspectives that emerge through group interaction rather than isolated individual responses.

Before data collection, a brief literature review (LR) was conducted to map the main constructs relevant to telecommunications consumer behavior, namely price perception, promotional influence, and customer experience. The LR served to inform the development of guiding questions for the discussions, ensuring that conversations remained aligned with established theoretical dimensions of consumer decision-making in service industries (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Xia et al., 2004).

Participants and Group Composition

Four focus groups were conducted in Batam, each consisting of approximately eight to nine participants. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to represent different household roles and decision-making contexts related to mobile communication use:

1. University student group
2. Parents of junior high school (SMP) students
3. Parents of senior high school (SMA) students
4. Fathers from a neighborhood sports club

These groups were chosen to reflect varying communication needs, financial considerations, and family responsibilities that potentially shape SIM card selection. Prior research suggests that life roles and daily functional demands influence how individuals evaluate service affordability and reliability (Robbins, 2010; Rockman et al., 2022).

Data Collection Procedure

All FGDs were conducted face-to-face in informal and comfortable settings to encourage open and natural conversation. The relaxed atmosphere was intended to reduce social pressure and enable participants to share personal experiences, preferences, and frustrations regarding mobile operator services (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

1. Each session explored topics such as:
2. Criteria used when choosing a SIM card
3. Comparisons between different operators
4. The role of price, promotions, and service experience
5. How family or work responsibilities affect mobile service needs

The group format enabled participants to respond to one another's stories, revealing contrasting priorities. For instance, some parents with children studying abroad emphasized the importance of longer validity periods and convenient top-up systems, while other parents prioritized low-cost internet packages to support their children's school assignments. Such interactions highlighted how purchasing decisions are socially constructed and influenced by differing household demands, a pattern often observed in service consumption contexts (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following qualitative procedures recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2017). The process involved:

1. Data familiarization, through repeated review of discussion notes and key statements
2. Initial coding, identifying references to pricing considerations, promotional appeal, and customer experience
3. Theme development, grouping codes into broader categories reflecting dominant decision drivers

4. Cross-group comparison, examining similarities and differences among the four participant groups

This comparative analysis allowed the researcher to understand how social roles and family contexts shape the relative importance of price, promotion, and service quality in decision-making.

Trustworthiness and Rigor, to enhance credibility, perspective triangulation was applied by comparing themes emerging from the four distinct groups. Consistent patterns across different participant categories strengthened the validity of interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In addition, reflective notes were used to minimize researcher bias and maintain transparency in the interpretation process.

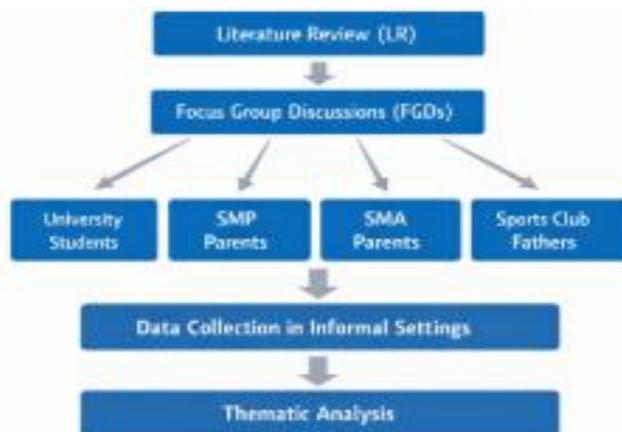


Figure 1. Flow of Research Method for Consumer Study in Batam (Sri Yusriani, 2026)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The focus group discussions reveal that SIM card purchasing decisions in Batam are influenced by price considerations, promotional attractiveness, and customer experience, with the relative importance of each factor differing across household roles and life contexts.

University Students: Price as the Primary Screening Factor

Among university students, price emerged as the dominant determinant. Participants described actively comparing data packages and switching providers when more affordable offers became available. Limited personal budgets made cost efficiency the main evaluation criterion.

Promotional bonuses were attractive only when they increased data value relative to price. Network quality was discussed mainly when service disruptions interfered with online classes or communication, indicating that service experience mattered primarily when it affected essential academic activities. These patterns align with findings that students balance economic constraints with functional connectivity needs (Robbins, 2010; Rockman et al., 2022).

Parents of SMP Students: Affordability for Children’s School Needs

Parents of junior high school (SMP) students framed SIM card decisions around supporting children’s digital learning. Affordable data packages were prioritized to ensure uninterrupted access for assignments, communication with teachers, and online learning activities.

Promotions offering bonus quotas were valued when they extended internet use without increasing costs. Customer experience became important only when poor signal quality disrupted children’s schoolwork. This highlights how purchasing decisions are shaped by caregiving roles and household educational responsibilities (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Parents of SMA Students: Balancing Cost with Service Continuity

Parents of senior high school (SMA) students showed a more balanced evaluation between price and network reliability. Older children were perceived to have higher and more varied digital needs, increasing the importance of stable connectivity.

A notable subgroup consisted of parents whose children studied outside Batam or abroad. These participants emphasized longer validity periods and convenient top-up systems over the cheapest data packages. For them, continuity and ease of management were more important than short-term savings, reflecting the growing role of service convenience in customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Fathers in a Neighborhood Sports Club: Practical and Social Considerations

Among fathers in the sports club group, SIM card decisions were influenced by practicality, peer recommendations, and exposure to promotions. Discussions revealed that many learned about operators through friends, family members, and community interactions (Yusriani & Patiro, 2024).

While price remained relevant, promotional visibility and perceived network reliability played a stronger role compared to the student and parent groups. The tendency to choose operators widely used within their social circle suggests the influence of social norms and word-of-mouth on service selection (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Cross-Group Pattern

Across all groups, price functioned as the initial decision filter, but its dominance was moderated by family responsibilities and mobility needs. Households with children studying abroad prioritized validity period and ease of credit refill, whereas households focused on local schooling prioritized low-cost internet packages.

Promotions acted as decision triggers, especially when aligned with daily usage needs such as bonus data (Blattberg & Neslin, 1990; Chandon et al., 2000). Meanwhile, customer experience influenced satisfaction and continued use rather than the initial purchase decision (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Discussion

This study confirms that price remains the most influential factor in SIM card purchasing decisions in Batam, supporting the view that price serves both as an economic constraint and a psychological indicator of value (Xia et al., 2004; Abidin et al., 2023). Consumers do not merely react to nominal price levels but interpret price in relation to perceived benefits, fairness, and available alternative offers. Similar patterns have been observed in other consumer contexts, where price perception significantly shapes purchase decisions alongside evaluations of product and service attributes (Fauziah et al., 2023). However, the findings also demonstrate that price does not operate in isolation; its influence is shaped by family roles, educational responsibilities, and mobility contexts.

Promotions were found to play a strong complementary role, particularly in stimulating switching behavior and short-term purchase decisions. This aligns with prior marketing research showing that promotional incentives can temporarily outweigh brand loyalty and perceived service differences (Blattberg & Neslin, 1990; Chandon et al., 2000).

Customer experience, especially network reliability and service continuity, appeared more relevant for long-term satisfaction rather than initial selection. This supports customer journey perspectives suggesting that experiential factors become more influential in post-purchase evaluation stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). An interesting pattern that emerged from the discussions relates to consumer self-efficacy in managing mobile communication choices. Several participants expressed confidence in comparing operators, evaluating packages, and determining which SIM card best fit their household needs. One parent noted, "*Sekarang saya sudah tahu cara pilih paket yang cocok, tidak asal ikut iklan lagi.*" Such statements reflect a

growing sense of personal agency in digital consumption decisions. This aligns with the concept of self-efficacy as individuals' belief in their capability to perform tasks and make effective decisions (Zimmerman, 2000). In the context of telecommunications, higher self-efficacy may encourage consumers to explore alternatives, switch providers when needed, and optimize service use according to family priorities.

The development of this confidence is also shaped by digital exposure and social learning within communities. As participants share experiences about network quality, pricing, and promotions, they gradually build the ability to assess service value independently. This echoes findings that social environments and informational support contribute to individuals' decision confidence in practical, everyday contexts (Sitohang et al., 2023; Gunarto et al., 2024).

Importantly, the study highlights that SIM card purchasing is a socially embedded decision, not merely an individual economic calculation. Parents' decisions were closely tied to children's educational needs, while community-based interactions shaped preferences among adult male participants. This reinforces the idea that consumer decisions are influenced by social roles and contextual responsibilities (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Marketing communication and promotional exposure also appear to play an indirect role in strengthening consumer decision competence. As individuals are repeatedly exposed to pricing comparisons, promotional messages, and peer recommendations, they become more skilled at evaluating alternatives and identifying offers that match their needs. This gradual learning process reflects how marketing environments can shape consumer judgment and decision behavior over time (Nguyen et al., 2024; Junaedi & Prihanisetyo, 2022).

Furthermore, the act of selecting and managing SIM card services may itself reinforce consumers' confidence in handling everyday digital decisions. When consumers successfully match a service package to their needs, it can enhance their perceived control and competence in navigating digital consumption, a mechanism consistent with the role of self-efficacy in decision-related behaviors (Zhang et al., 2018).

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study used qualitative focus groups with a limited number of participants, which restricts generalizability beyond similar urban contexts. Second, discussions relied on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Third, the study focused on Batam, a unique industrial and border city; consumer behavior in rural or less digitally connected regions may differ.

Future research could apply quantitative methods to test the relative strength of price, promotion, and customer experience across larger samples, or conduct comparative studies across different Indonesian cities.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study provide important strategic insights for mobile network operators operating in emerging urban markets such as Batam. Although price remains the primary entry point in consumer decision-making, long-term success depends on how well operators integrate pricing, promotions, and customer experience while acknowledging the social and family contexts in which mobile services are used.

Segment-Sensitive Pricing Strategies

Because price functions as the initial screening factor for most participants, operators should adopt tiered and segment-specific pricing structures. Students and households with school-age children demonstrated strong sensitivity to affordable data packages, particularly for educational use. Clearly structured, low-cost bundles designed for learning and daily communication can enhance perceived price fairness and increase attractiveness among price-conscious segments (Xia et al., 2004; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

However, the study also revealed a distinct subgroup of parents whose children study outside the city or abroad. These families prioritized longer validity periods, stable balances, and convenient top-up mechanisms over the cheapest nominal price. For them, service continuity reduces emotional and logistical stress, especially when managing communication across distance. This reflects how digital connectivity supports family coordination and remote care, an increasingly relevant aspect of modern digital life (Rekarti et al., 2025; Yusriani et al., 2025).

Targeted and Contextual Promotions

Promotions emerged as strong decision accelerators, particularly when they directly addressed users' daily realities. Educational bonus data, family-sharing quotas, or long-validity promotions were perceived as highly relevant. Sales promotion research suggests that such tangible benefits can effectively stimulate switching behavior and short-term demand (Blattberg & Neslin, 1990; Chandon et al., 2000).

The findings also highlight the importance of community-based diffusion. In groups such as neighborhood sports clubs, decisions were influenced by peer recommendations and visible usage within social circles. Operators can leverage this by designing localized or community-targeted campaigns that encourage collective adoption and referral-based incentives, reducing perceived risk and enhancing trust (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Strengthening Customer Experience for Retention

Although customer experience did not always drive the initial purchase, it played a crucial role in retention and long-term satisfaction. Participants expressed frustration when network instability disrupted children's schooling or family communication. This indicates that service reliability directly affects household functioning, not just individual convenience.

Moreover, many parents stated they were reluctant to change phone numbers once established, even when upgrading their devices. Numbers had already been widely shared with schools, family members, colleagues, and digital platforms. This "number inertia" suggests that once customers are acquired, they are less likely to switch if basic service expectations are met. Operators should therefore view network quality and responsive support as key retention tools rather than merely technical requirements (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Recognizing Institutional and Workplace Influences

Another important finding was that some participants used SIM cards provided through workplace facilities. In such cases, choice was not entirely consumer-driven but shaped by institutional arrangements. This suggests opportunities for operators to expand corporate or institutional partnership packages, particularly for organizations providing communication allowances or bundled devices.

Given the increasing integration of digital communication into work and daily life, such partnerships can strengthen brand presence while aligning with employees' need for seamless digital connectivity across work and family domains (Rekarti et al., 2025; Yusriani et al., 2025).

Family-Oriented Communication Strategies

The study reinforces that SIM card decisions are often embedded within family responsibility structures, not purely individual preferences. Marketing communication should therefore highlight how mobile services support children's learning, enable family coordination, and maintain relationships across distance. This finding reflects the growing role of digital connectivity in supporting educational engagement and shaping everyday behavioral practices, where access to mobile internet becomes a foundation for learning-related activities (Yanti et al., 2025).

Framing telecom services as enablers of educational continuity, parental care, and digital family life may resonate more strongly than purely technical messaging. This aligns with broader trends showing that digital tools are deeply intertwined with household functioning and well-being (Yusriani et al., 2025; Yusriani & Patiro, 2024; Wardani & Amaliah, 2020).

Integrating Price, Promotion, and Experience

Finally, operators should adopt an integrated strategic approach. Competitive pricing attracts attention, targeted promotions encourage trial, and reliable service quality ensures customers remain, especially those who feel “locked in” due to number continuity and social connectivity networks.

Sustainable competitiveness therefore depends on aligning short-term acquisition tactics with long-term relationship management, ensuring that promotional promises are supported by consistent service performance (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer a central question: Is price still king in consumers’ decisions to choose mobile operator SIM cards in Batam? The findings suggest that price remains the primary entry point in consumer evaluation, functioning as the first filter in SIM card selection. Across students, parents, and community-based groups, affordability and perceived value-for-money were consistently highlighted as the most immediate determinants of choice (Xia et al., 2004; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

However, the study also demonstrates that price does not operate in isolation. Promotional relevance and customer experience significantly shape how price is interpreted and whether a service remains satisfactory over time. Promotions that align with real-life needs, such as educational data packages or long-validity offers, act as powerful purchase triggers (Blattberg & Neslin, 1990; Chandon et al., 2000). Meanwhile, reliable network performance and convenient service management influence post-purchase satisfaction and retention, consistent with customer journey perspectives (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Importantly, SIM card purchasing decisions were found to be socially embedded rather than purely individual economic choices. Parents’ decisions were closely tied to children’s educational needs, communication continuity, and family coordination. Some participants also relied on SIM cards provided through workplace facilities, illustrating the influence of institutional contexts on consumer behavior. Additionally, many adults expressed reluctance to change phone numbers once widely shared, indicating that number continuity creates a form of behavioral inertia that reinforces long-term provider retention.

Together, these findings suggest that while price may still be “king,” it rules within a broader ecosystem of family responsibilities, promotional stimuli, service reliability, and social attachment to communication identity.

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, quantitative studies could be conducted to test the relative strength of price, promotion, and customer experience across larger and more diverse populations. Second, comparative research across different Indonesian cities or rural regions could explore how digital infrastructure levels influence SIM card decision drivers.

Future studies may also examine number retention behavior and the psychological attachment to mobile numbers as part of digital identity. Additionally, research could explore how institutional arrangements, such as employer-provided communication packages, shape consumer autonomy in telecom service choices. Finally, longitudinal studies could investigate how customer experience influences switching behavior over time, especially in rapidly evolving digital environments.

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