



Shaping Identity through Consumption: A Qualitative Exploration of Generation Z's Consumer Habits

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Abstract

Title: Shaping Identity through Consumption: A Qualitative Exploration of Generation Z's Consumer Habits

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This study investigates how Generation Z's consumer habits shape their identity formation through consumption. Using qualitative focus group analysis, it examines the influence of social comparison, brand values, and social belonging on consumption behavior. The findings reveal that social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok intensify consumption pressure by reinforcing upward social comparison and increasing exposure to consumer-oriented content. Participants reported adapting their consumption patterns to align with both personal values and social expectations, reflecting a strategic balance between individuality and conformity. The study identifies brand authenticity and value consistency as key drivers of trust and engagement, with participants favoring brands that reflect their identity and social status. However, the tension between short-term trends and long-term identity goals remains evident, highlighting the psychological complexity of consumption decisions. These insights offer practical implications for brands seeking to engage Generation Z authentically through value-driven and socially conscious marketing strategies.

Keywords: *Generation Z, Identity Formation, Consumer Behavior, Consumption Patterns, Brand Values, Social Comparison, Social Media*

Abstract (versão portuguesa)

Título: Moldando a Identidade através do Consumo: Uma Exploração Qualitativa dos Hábitos de Consumo da Geração Z

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Este estudo investiga como os hábitos de consumo da Geração Z moldam a formação da sua identidade por meio do consumo. Utilizando uma análise qualitativa de grupos focais, o estudo examina a influência da comparação social, dos valores de marca e do senso de pertencimento social sobre o comportamento de consumo. Os resultados revelam que plataformas de mídia social, como Instagram e TikTok, intensificam a pressão de consumo ao reforçar a comparação social ascendente e aumentar a exposição a conteúdos voltados para o consumo. Os participantes relataram que adaptam seus padrões de consumo para alinhar-se tanto com seus valores pessoais quanto com as expectativas sociais, refletindo um equilíbrio estratégico entre individualidade e conformidade. O estudo identifica a autenticidade da marca e a consistência de valores como fatores-chave para a construção de confiança e engajamento, com os participantes demonstrando preferência por marcas que refletem sua identidade e status social. No entanto, a tensão entre as tendências de curto prazo e os objetivos de identidade de longo prazo permanece evidente, destacando a complexidade psicológica das decisões de consumo. Esses insights oferecem implicações práticas para marcas que buscam se conectar com a Geração Z de maneira autêntica, por meio de estratégias de marketing orientadas por valores e socialmente conscientes.

Palavras-chave: *Geração Z, Formação de Identidade, Comportamento do Consumidor, Padrões de Consumo, Valores de Marca, Comparação Social, Mídias Sociais*

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List of Abbreviations

FG – Focus Group

FOMO – Fear of Missing out

Gen Z – Generation Z

H – Hypothesis

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1 Introduction

Generation Z, born since the mid-1990s, is a unique generational cohort (Katz et al., 2021). They are the first generation of digital natives, meaning they have never known a world without digital technologies. The beliefs, values, and worldviews of Generation Z – also known as Gen Z – differ from those of previous generations (Grenman, et al., 2023). Characteristics assigned to Gen Z are highly thoughtful, promising, and being a generation that is warning their elders about the risks the world is facing, such as the climate crisis (Katz et al., 2021). They are also characterised as global and mobile (Seemiller & Grace, 2018), as being value-driven, prioritising authenticity, social consciousness, sustainability, and social impact, and showing a strong preference for tailored experiences and products (NIQ, 2023; 2024).

By 2030, Gen Z is estimated to be the largest generational cohort, accounting for 32% of the global population with increasing purchasing power and being the central working force (Fu & Ren, 2023; Yamane & Kaneko, 2021). In fact, their spending power is expected to reach \$12T by 2030 (NIQ, 2024). Therefore, understanding this generational cohort will be an imperative in the forthcoming years, especially considering their unique characteristics will impact their consumption behaviour (NIQ, 2024). Consequently, understanding and adapting to the preferences and values of Gen Z is no longer optional but an imperative for remaining competitive in the market of today and the near future.

This background is even more salient considering theoretical approaches to values, ideology, and consumption patterns, such as social theory, which assumes that the values and beliefs of social groups shape consumers' identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In a more recent work, research conducted by Schmitt et al. (2022) concludes that ideology, in the sense of values and beliefs, is a guiding hand affecting individuals' identity and actions. People's values are decisive factors in their decision-making processes and manifest as a consumption ideology. They affect how consumers buy and use marketplace products, services, and experiences. Hence, values and beliefs affecting consumption patterns are part of any consumer's social reality (Schmitt et al., 2022). The influence of individuals' beliefs and values may impact consumers both consciously or unconsciously and this influence is reflected and enacted through consumption (Schmitt et al., 2022).

Against this background, the present thesis intends to explore Gen Z's consumer habits and to what extent this cohort shapes their identity by means of their consumption patterns.

1.1 Current State of Research

Two research fields are relevant for the purpose of the present thesis. On the one hand, a growing research body focuses on the particularities of Gen Z, aiming to provide reasons for the unique characteristics of this generational cohort (e.g., Grenman et al., 2023; Katz et al., 2021). This research stream has gained traction in the last years as this generation grows and becomes increasingly relevant in society's dynamics. The majority of the research body concentrates on exploring the unique values and beliefs of this generation and their effect across different realms (e.g., Liu et al., 2021). On the other hand, based on a series of theoretical approaches such as social theory or social comparison theory, a consistent research body explores the relationship between identity formation and consumption patterns. Numerous studies (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2022) demonstrate that values or beliefs constituting an individual's identity are enacted through consumption. The present thesis intends to link both research streams by specifically focusing on how Gen Z enacts its identity through consumption.

1.2 Contribution of this Study

The present study contributes to the research field by improving the understanding of how Gen Z's consumer habits are related to identity-shaping processes. Against this background, the central research question of this thesis intends to identify the extent to which consumption behaviours contribute to shaping identity within Gen Z (*"How do Generation Z's consumer habits influence their identity formation?"*).

Further, based on the insights provided by the theoretical framework, which advocates for considering consumption as a form of identity expression, additional sub-questions were formulated, each addressing a specific aspect of the relationship between consumption and identity. As such, the first sub-question explores: "In what ways do Social Media platforms like Instagram and TikTok intensify consumption pressure among Generation Z?". The second research question examines the role of individuality, social group norms, and uncertainty in Gen Z's consumption behaviour by focusing on "How does Generation Z navigate the tension between individuality and conformity in their consumption choices?". Brands and the values they promote also play a role in shaping the self-identity and purchasing behaviour of Gen Z; hence, the following sub-question was formulated: "How do brand values influence Gen Z's self-identity and purchasing decisions?". To examine how Gen Z balances short-term trend adoption and long-term identity goals through their consumption choices, the last sub-question

explores: “How does Generation Z distinguish between short-term identity functions and long-term identity goals through their consumption choices?”

2 Generation Z and the Role of Consumption in Identity Formation

2.1 Defining Identity Formation Through Consumption

In his foundational work, Belk (1988) asserted that “we are what we have [...] is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior”. This statement is supported by an extensive research body linking consumption patterns to identity formation processes, where distinct research streams coexist. A significant research stream focuses on the relationship between identity formation and consumption as well as the impact of identity on consumption (Gao et al., 2009; Wheeler et al., 2005). Merely a residual share of the research field explores the reciprocity between identity and consumption (Sassonko, 2020; Thompson & Loveland, 2015).

Before delving into the process of identity formation through consumption, the concept of identity must be elucidated. From a linguistic perspective, the concept of identity can be defined as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). In the marketing and psychology research field, the definition of the concept involves the notion that every person has a series of identities. The different characteristics that constitute an individual’s general identity affects their self-concept. Reed et al. (2012, p. 312) define these different identities as “any category label to which a consumer self-associates either by choice or by endowment.” The term self-view is equally closely related to identity and refers to how a person sees themselves and which characteristics define them (Gao et al., 2009).

The understanding of the term consumption must be clarified as well in this context. In general terms, consumption “encompasses the purchase and subsequent use of goods and services (Oxford University Press, 2017). Nonetheless, a purchase decision is not always necessarily involved in the process (Sassonko, 2020). Moreover, experiences can also constitute consumption processes, such as those combined with goods and services (Kleine et al., 2009).

Exploring the relationship between both concepts, a research stream emerged studying the relationship between identity formation processes through consumption (Strelitz, 2008). Especially in modern societies, the impact of consumption on identity formation has gained traction. Miller (1997) explains that, while centuries ago, identity formation was mainly influenced by production and individuals’ roles as workers or owners, in contemporary society,

consumption is the central domain conferring identity. This can be explained by the fact that consumption provides individuals with the feeling that they still have some sort of control over this domain (Mackay, 1997).

A further research stream, though, asserts that media consumption is the cornerstone of identity formation. Thompson (1995) explains that, in contemporary society, traditional sources conferring identity such as religion or family have lost their legitimacy, especially in the case of younger generations. Consequently, individuals have opted for other sources, 'mediated symbolic materials' (Strelitz, 2008), for constructing their identities.

Stone (1962) argues that identity formation processes through symbols or objects entail appearing, reflecting upon it and describing one's identity in response to that appearance. This process exacerbates during a transitional phase, where consumption serves to ease the disconnect that occurs during the phase in which a new identity is established (Prothero, 2002). Different factors can affect individuals' consumption patterns, such as life disruptions or changes, or transitional periods, as they are likely to be more open to changing their consumption behaviour. Andreasen (1984) considers transitional life periods as a key predictor of changes in consumption patterns, which are, beyond the basic needs, driven by the desire "to feel good, physically and emotionally" (Brown, 2024, p. 227), a plethora of studies have investigated how consumers change their consumption patterns and behaviours when going through expected life events and transitions (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2001; Mathur et al., 2003).

Liu et al. (2021) examine the link between identity formation and fashion clothing consumption, which not only aims to satisfy the desire of individuals to accomplish a given look but also higher-level needs of love, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation; but it may also be a reflection of people's mental health and well-being (Pavia & Mason, 2004). In fact, clothing is deemed a communication tool of status and identity in society (Brown, 2024). The presentation of self includes efforts to create impressions in the minds of others (Goffman, 1959). Women, for instance, are particularly defined by society by their appearance (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1990). Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) also positioned dress as a communication tool during social interactions and articulated the ways that dress influences how identities are established.

2.2 Social, Cultural, and Technological Influences

Social, cultural and technological influences play a pivotal role in identity formation processes and consumption patterns. Also, age is one of the most salient characteristics of consumer markets, as it determines individuals' social, cultural and political identity. Hence, it is a central topic of the research field (Bolton et al., 2013).

In fact, the communication environment has varying impacts on each generation and, therefore, each cohort has its own communication patterns and habits.

There is no clear consensus on the exact birth years that define Gen Z. Most sources identify Gen Z as individuals born somewhere between 1995 or 1997 and 2010 or 2012 (Katz et al., 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020). However, a few sources propose different date ranges (Brown, 2024). The defining characteristic of this generation is that they are the first true digital natives. Various historical moments, such as the terrorist attacks on September 11th on the World Trade Centre, the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the global recession in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic, have profoundly shaped Gen Z. These events have affected this generation in that they are generally defined as more pessimistic, anxious, financially responsible, motivated and seeking to work independently (Brown, 2024; Swartz et al., 2017). Further, as a result of having grown up in a more diverse society, they exhibit higher levels of tolerance and diversity acceptance (Brown, 2024).

Also, the communication environment affects generations differently, thus, each and every one of them has different communication patterns and habits. Being the first generation of 'digital natives,' they are unique consumers in terms of communication and consumption habits. These are different from those of previous generations, making them unique consumers (Smalukiene et al., 2020). Research ascribes a series of distinctive characteristics to this generation, such as egocentricity, versatility, hyper-connectivity, cultural tolerance, tolerance to otherness and a social mindset (Kubátová, 2016; Smalukiene et al., 2020). These characteristics are found to shape their preferences and consumer behaviour.

In the same line, Kellner (1995, p. 1) refers to the existence of a 'media culture' shaping individuals' social behaviour and views about different domains and constituting a basis and providing role models according to which people forge their identities:

“Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people

construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them'. Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts of the world today. Media culture provides the materials to create identities whereby individuals insert themselves into contemporary techno-capitalist societies and which is producing a new form of global culture." (Kellner, 1995, p. 1)

Beyond that, these aspects are especially salient for younger individuals and adolescents, who are going through an identity formation process. This process is characterised by a fundamental desire to belong to a peer group (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Hence, in order to belong to this group, younger consumers are considered to be more willing to spend or overspend to belong to the group in question (Hornsey, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its inherent lockdowns exacerbated feelings of loneliness and stress that were already affecting young generations and resulted in the emergence of a new set of values, such as hedonism and a preference for seeking experiences and attitudes guided by the motto "You Only Live Once" (Zwanka & Buff, 2020, p. 61). These values imply that seizing every opportunity to make new experiences and travel are top priorities over financial stability or the future, which is more uncertain than ever for this cohort (Zwanka & Buff, 2020).

Beyond that, social networks are central to the identity formation of Gen Z, often playing a monopolising role in their lives and providing spaces where they can express their individual identity and experiment with who they are and what they represent (Davies, 2020). Research also finds that Gen Z's consumer behaviour is shaped by their identity and beliefs. The consumer patterns of this age group are more likely to be aligned with their personal values. They also tend to use social media more often to connect with others sharing similar or the same beliefs. Social media also impact their consumption patterns in that they adopt a more consumptive lifestyle. Also, research finds that younger individuals going through identity formation processes tend to acquire symbols aligned with their identity and aligned with peers sharing the same values and beliefs (Salam, 2020).

3 Theoretical Framework

In the present chapter, a review of the main theories of the research field will be presented. The focus of the chapter will be put on theories such as Social Comparison Theory and The Self-Concept Theory as well as other salient theoretical constructs such as consumer psychology, individuality and conformity.

3.1 Social Comparison Theory: Consumption Pressure Through Social Media

The social comparison theory was first established by Festinger in 1954, stating that every individual has the innate drive to assess their position in numerous areas of their lives. For this evaluation of their situation and in absence of objective measures, individuals tend to do so by comparing themselves with others. Festinger (1954) also added that individuals have a natural drive to make correct assessments of themselves when discussing the function of motivation. To do so, they tend to rely on non-social, objective methods (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2020). A significant research stream emerged with the aim to expand Festinger's (1954) foundational work.

The path of comparison (upward vs. downward) and the reasons and consequences of social comparison in each direction gained traction in the research field (Taylor & Armes, 2024). As such, it was concluded that downward comparisons permit individuals to increase their well-being by comparing with others are considered as less fortunate and occur mostly when individuals need to feel better about their own situation (Wills, 1981). Upward comparisons refer to the act of individuals making comparisons to someone perceived as superior to themselves in terms of factors such as physical appearance or success. This path of comparison may have a detrimental impact on the individual's self-esteem and happiness or may result in individuals desiring to become like the comparison targets (Wang et al., 2020). Rancourt et al. (2015) add that the expectations of individuals regarding the degree of perceived similarity to the comparison target contribute to reducing the negative consequences resulting from upward comparisons.

In the current digitalised society, social media provides a fertile ground for social comparison processes, as individuals are exposed to myriads of social media account postings. This provides an unprecedented number of material for social comparison processes (Yang, 2021). In addition to that, due to social media positivity bias, individuals are more likely to post about positive aspects about themselves instead of accurate portrayals (Yang et al., 2017). This results

in users more frequently engaging in upward comparison than in downward comparison (Yang, 2021). Examples of online upward social comparison can be individuals posting about incredible and exclusive items they possess, making them objects of desire. In fact, research states that viewing such content on social media can cause feelings of inferiority, envy and frustration. To accomplish conformity with this group, individuals may feel the pressure to acquire the items in question. In fact, in relation to consumption patterns, peer pressure is the most common sociopsychological state and has direct impact on individual behaviours and decision-making processes through social interaction (Hu et al., 2021). In fact, peer pressure is found to encourage individuals to engage in either social exclusion or social conformity (Mani et al., 2013). Rütter et al. (2023) found that adolescents who were more exposed to upward social comparisons experienced intensified feelings of inadequacy, which could result in peer pressure to conform to the standards they are exposed to on social media.

3.2 Social Identity in Consumption Culture: Individuality and Conformity

Social identity theory focuses on explaining how “people relate to each other as a collective”. This approach centres on how individuals adopt a group identity and use it to relate to other groups. Tajfel et al. (1971) consider social identity as part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their belonging to a social group together and the meaning of that membership. Turner et al. (1987) explored the relationship between the self-concept and how it interacts and impacts group behaviour. This research stream concluded that individuals show favouritism towards the in-group (Hornsey, 2008). This implies that social identity is forged by a cognitive dimension based on the knowledge individuals have of the group they belong to, and an affective dimension based on the extent to which individuals value their membership to this group.

This theory serves to explain the frame of reference of individuals’ social patterns. Individuals hold multiple identities such as gender, race and profession that affect and form their social identity. The marketing and consumption research field adopts the social identity framework to explore normative influences on consumer behaviour, i.e. how consumers exhibit a behaviour in conformity with their social identity and uses inter-group relationships as a predictor of consumption patterns (Verlegh, 2007).

Identity is also a central construct for consumer culture theory. Arnold and Thompson (2005) state this theoretical framework “refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that addresses the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (p.

868). This theoretical approach also asserts that individuals construct their identities around consumption activities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) outline that consumer culture theory consists of four research avenues such as consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, socio-historic patterns of consumption as well as mass mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. Consumer identity projects refer to goal-driven consumption activities such as cosmopolitanism (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Consumers creating subcultures in relation to consumption activities, for instance, youth subcultures, are described as marketplace cultures. Socio-historic patterns of consumption refer to the social structures that influence consumption like class, ethnicity and gender (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies refer to consumers' role in interpreting marketing messages and how consumers derive meaning from those messages.

3.3 The Self-Concept Theory: Brands and Personal Values

Each individual has a perception about themselves regarding their looks, abilities and characteristics, constituting their self-concept. This self-concept can be defined as “the totality of an individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to themselves as an object” (Jeong & Ko, 2021, p. 3). Baumeister (1999) describes it as: “The individual’s belief about himself or herself, including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is” (p. 247). Mead (1934) found that this self-concept emerges especially in social interactions as a result of individuals’ concerns about how they are perceived by others. Shaffer (2000) states that this self-concept is not innate but rather developed through social interactions with others in a certain environment. Shavelson and Bolus (1982) synthesise the various definitions of the research field, asserting that self-concept is an individual’s understanding of oneself in broader aspects. This idea of self-concept can encompass physical, emotional, social or spiritual traits, among others, that form a person’s identity (Neill, 2005). Additionally, it is a multidimensional construct that can be broken down into individual aspects. For instance, a person’s self-concept may vary depending on the aspect, i.e. in terms of physical appearance or social relations.

This self-concept is not permanent or static but rather evolves in the course of time. Han (2017) describes self-concept as a process through which socially accepted values are internalised, forming a basis for a set of behaviours. An example of these behaviours are consumption patterns and motivations that tend to be in accordance with an individual’s values and behaviours, thus becoming a mechanism that forges an individual’s self-concept. In fact,

contemporary consumers show strong tendencies to express their self-concept through consumption behaviour. This is especially applicable to certain industries, e.g. the fashion industry, in which there is a strong tendency to express personal values through fashion instead of verbal communication (Jeong & Ko, 2021). In fact, younger consumers prefer brands that underscore values such as authenticity, environmental protection and social responsibility above profit-driven strategies. As a result, companies have increasingly adopted consumer-centric approaches, emphasising the importance of buyer ethics as much as corporate ethics. This implies that consumer awareness transcends matters of reasonable consumption.

3.4 Consumer Psychology: Short-Term Trends vs. Long-Term Consumption

The concept of consumer psychology refers to the research field investigating how individuals navigate judgments and decisions related to the consumption of products and services, and how marketplace phenomena affect attitudes, choices and personal and group identities (Posavac et al., 2012). It is an interdisciplinary field, as it uses theories and methods from psychology, marketing, advertising, economics, sociology and anthropology to understand how and why individuals and groups engage in consumer activities (Jansson-Boyd, 2010). Focal points of this discipline are the cognitive processes underlying the consumption behaviours and the processing of information during their consumption (Tatzel, 2003). In marketing, consumer psychology is assessed as an essential mechanism for companies and brands to influence consumer behaviour by using tailored marketing strategies.

Research considers that values are a critical element of consumer psychology (Reimann et al., 2012). Belk (1988) explains that, knowingly or unknowingly, emotionally or unintentionally, individuals regard their possessions as parts of themselves. Tuan argues: “Our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess” (1980, p. 472). As synthesised by Belk (1988), “we are what we have” (p. 160). Vinson et al. (1977) state that personal values function as a standard or criterion for influencing personal choices, thus indicating a relationship between values and behaviour. In fact, values are considered cognitive elements which stimulate motivation for behavioural response. In the same line, it is found that product attributes represent the basic elements ordering an individual’s attitude towards products and services. Conversely, an individual’s attributes are found to be influenced by their values (Vinson et al., 1977). Brands provide consumers “ideal selves” to aspire to, as the presentation of self through possessions allows consumers to escape from their “real selves” (Malär et al., 2011).

4 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing focus groups to investigate the relationship between consumption and identity formation in Gen Z. The following chapter outlines the methodological framework, explaining the rationale for the chosen research design and the benefits of focus group discussions. A structured overview is presented which includes the development of the research question and hypotheses. This is followed by the development of an interview guide, participant selection and analysis procedures, culminating in an interpretation of the results.

4.1 Research Design

The choice between qualitative and quantitative research methods depends on the on the research objectives of the study and the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Since this study explores how Generation Z constructs identity through consumption, a qualitative approach using focus groups represents the most suitable method.

Qualitative research is inherently exploratory and particularly well-suited to examining complex social phenomena such as identity formation and development (Park & Park, 2016) Identity is not a fixed or objectively measurable construct but a fluid and socially constructed process, shaped by individual meaning-making, self-perception, emotions, and social contexts, including the sense of belonging. Standardized measurements frequently fail to accurately encapsulate these highly personal and dynamic elements. Instead, qualitative methods allow for an in-depth understanding of how consumption behaviors reflect and shape identity over time (Baumeister, 2002).

Focus groups provide a distinct benefit in uncovering these processes. Participants are able to exchange personal narratives and gain a collective understanding of the significance of their consumption decisions. The interactive approach promotes varied viewpoints and uncovers the interaction of societal influence, individual values, and components of consumer culture. Elements that structured surveys or experimental designs often overlook (Sargeant, 2012; Monrad, 2013).

Furthermore, the open-ended nature of qualitative research allows for the identification of unexpected patterns and nuances in identity formation. Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on fixed variables, qualitative methods uncover the symbolic and emotional meanings

embedded in consumption choices (Baumeister, 2002). Creating an environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences is essential to addressing both the personal and social dimensions of identity.

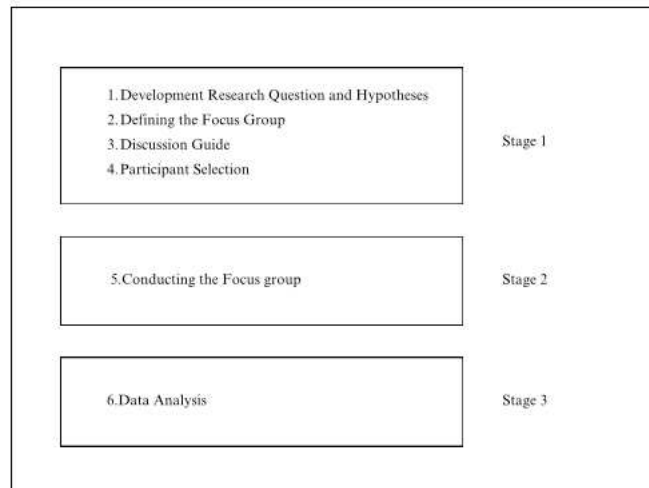


Figure 1. Stages of Focus Group Research

The development of focus groups follows a three-stage process, as shown in the image above. The next chapters will outline this process step by step.

4.2 Development of the Research Question and Hypotheses

The central research question,

"How do Generation Z's consumer habits influence their identity formation?",

stems directly from the study's title and aims to explore the extent to which consumption behaviors shape identity within Gen Z.

To develop specific sub-questions and hypotheses, a comprehensive review of relevant literature was conducted. This analysis identified key frameworks that explain the psychological and social forces driving Generation Z's consumption patterns and their influence on identity formation. Building on these findings, targeted sub-questions were formulated to address distinct aspects of the consumption-identity relationship. The thematic categories were carefully designed to ensure coherence, conceptual clarity, and empirical validity. This integrated approach provides a solid foundation for the research design and data collection.

4.2.1 Social Comparison: Social Media Influence on Consumption Pressure

To examine how social media influence consumption pressure among Gen Z, the following sub-question and hypotheses have been developed:

"In what ways do Social Media like Instagram and TikTok intensify consumption pressure among Gen Z?"

H1: Social comparison on social media increases perceived consumption pressure among Gen Z.

The social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals assess their own standing through comparisons with others. In the context of social media, this indicates that the compulsion to purchase similar things might be exacerbated by witnessing purchasing habits of others. This is intensified by upward social comparison (Wills, 1981), as individuals often showing only the good aspects of their lives, creating unrealistic standards. The goal is to examine whether social comparisons amplify consumption pressure and whether social media fosters the need to align with an idealized self-image through consumption.

H2: Repeated exposure to consumer-oriented content on social media leads to an increase in purchasing behavior among Gen Z.

Based on the Mere Exposure Effect (Zajonc, 1968), repeated exposure to consumer-related content increases the likelihood of purchasing decisions among Generation Z. Continuous exposure to such content may enhance both interest and willingness to buy. The goal is to examine whether frequent exposure to consumer content on social media actually leads to increased purchasing behavior.

4.2.2 Social Identity: Individuality and Conformity

To examine how Gen Z navigates the tension between individuality and conformity in their consumption choices, the following sub-question and hypothesis have been developed:

"How does Generation Z navigate the tension between individuality and conformity in their consumption choices?"

H1: Gen Z perceives their consumption choices as more influenced by social conformity than by individuality.

Consumption serves as a central means of constructing and expressing identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumer Identity Projects (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999) claim that making purchases allows people to express their individuality and shape their self-image. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1971) considers that individuals define their identities through social group membership as well as align with to group norms. This is backed by In-Group Favoritism (Hornsey, 2008), which indicates that individuals are more likely to favor purchase decisions that strengthen their sense of belonging. The goal is to determine whether Gen Z's consumption behavior is primarily driven by the need for self-expression or by the desire to align with peer-driven norms.

4.2.3 Self-Concept Theory: Brand and Personal Values

To explore how brand values shape the self-identity and purchasing behavior of Generation Z, the following sub-question and hypotheses have been developed:

"How do brand values influence Gen Z's self-identity and purchasing decisions?"

H1: Gen Z desires alignment between their personal values and brand values.

Based on Han (2017) and Jeong & Ko (2021), consumption behavior serves as a mechanism for identity formation. As a result, Gen Z should consciously selects brands that reflect their personal values. The goal is to explore the extent to which Gen Z deliberately chooses brands that align with their individual beliefs and values.

H2: Brand choice serves as a means for Gen Z to achieve social identification and belonging.

Based on Mead (1934) and Shaffer (2000), self-concept develops through social interaction, and consumption choices help individuals position themselves within specific social groups and demonstrate belonging. The goal is to examine the social aspect of consumption by investigating whether brand choice serves as a means of social identification for Generation Z.

4.2.4 Consumer Psychology: Short-Term Trends and Long-Term Consumption

To examine how Generation Z balances short-term trend adoption and long-term identity goals through consumption, the following sub-question and hypotheses have been developed:

„How does Generation Z distinguish between short-term identity functions and long-term identity goals through their consumption choices“

H1: Generation Z places high value on being among the first to adopt trends.

Based on Belk (1988) and Malär et al. (2011), consumption serves as a means of self-expression. Generation Z strives to position itself as innovative and fashion-conscious by adopting trends early. The goal is to examine to what extent early trend adoption plays a central role in the identity formation of Gen Z.

H2: Generation Z aspires to long-term values but often follows short-term trends.

Vinson et al. (1977) and Reimann et al. (2012) have shown that values have an impact on consumer decisions. However, short-term trends frequently collide with long-term value orientations. This research investigation examines how Generation Z addresses these conflicting forces and identifies the factors that influence their choices.

The sub-questions and hypotheses establish a systematic framework for investigating the processes underlying identity construction through consumption.

4.3 Defining the Focus Group

Several factors must be considered when determining the optimal composition of focus groups. Homogeneity among participants in terms of socio-occupational hierarchy is crucial, as it helps minimize power dynamics and facilitates the reconstruction of collective viewpoints (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). Homogeneous groups promote smoother discussions by eliminating cultural and status-related barriers that might hinder open communication.

Participants for this investigation were recruited exclusively from Generation Z (1995-2010), guaranteeing that they shared a common generational heritage. Furthermore, the existence of a digital identity was a critical determinant in the investigation of identity formation in this context, as all participants had one.

The ideal group size depends on the research objectives, number of questions, time allocated per question, session format, and the overall duration (Tang & Davis, 1995). Based on these factors, three focus groups were conducted, each consisting of six to eight participants. This size strikes a balance between enabling in-depth discussions and incorporating diverse perspectives. According to Krueger & Casey (2000, p. 10), a group of this size is “small enough

for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions.”

4.4 Discussion Guide

The design of the discussion guide offers a structured yet adaptable framework for the focus groups. Ensuring a focused exploration of consumption habits and identity formation while facilitating natural interaction.

It follows a three-phase structure:

1. **Introduction** – Welcome, purpose of the discussion, guidelines (respectful communication, confidentiality, encouragement to participate), and participant introductions.
2. **Main Discussion** – Conversation structured around four thematic blocks: (1) Social Media and Consumption Pressure, (2) Individuality vs. Conformity, (3) Brands and Self-Identity, and (4) Short-Term vs. Long-Term Consumption. The structure of this phase was developed based on the sub-questions and hypotheses outlined in Chapter 4.2.
3. **Conclusion** – Reflection and self-assessment.

All of the questions were worded neutrally to promote open and honest answers. They have been designed to elicit detailed narratives rather than simple yes-or-no answers (Colucci, 2007). A pre-test was conducted to refine the wording and flow of the discussion.

4.5 Participant Selection

The recruitment of participants was conducted through a multi-channel approach. Combining university networks (e.g., WhatsApp groups, personal contacts) and social media activity through Instagram. This method ensured access to digitally engaged individuals which are familiar with the consumer culture. Well-suited for discussions on identity formation and consumption practices (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001).

To create a diverse and balanced sample, participants were randomly selected, ensuring gender diversity and a mix of students and working professionals. A minimum of two to three participants of the opposite gender were included in each group to facilitate equitable discussions. The final sample contained nine male and nine female participants. This setup

allowed genuine discussions, urging participants to interact with varied viewpoints and contemplate both common and divergent experiences related to identity development through consuming. Ethical integrity was maintained via informed consent and data anonymization. Participants consented to the study voluntarily, and all identifying information was eliminated. Data was securely archived and subsequently erased following the conclusion of the study.

4.6 Conducting the Focus Group

The focus group discussions were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. This enhanced accessibility, eliminated geographical constraints, and guaranteed a diverse sample that accurately represented the diverse cultural perspectives of Generation Z. The duration of each session was approximately 60 minutes; nevertheless, it was extended if the discussions became dynamic. This provided the opportunity to examine important themes in greater depth. Transcriptions of the conversations are provided in the appendix. The sessions were conducted by a single moderator who fostered active engagement and established a structured yet liberated environment. The discussion was directed by the moderator, who also posed follow-up questions and maintained the focus on the research objectives.

4.7 Data Analysis

Focus groups produce both individual and group-dynamic data, analyzable at two levels: (1) the relational level, which emphasizes participant interactions, and (2) the content level, which analyses the group's output and individual remarks. This investigation emphasizes the content level, which is supplemented by an assessment of nonverbal communication at the relationship level (Lindgren et al., 2020).

o conduct a systematic evaluation of the data, Mayring's structuring content analysis was implemented. This theory-driven methodology employs a deductive coding approach, wherein categories are created from established theoretical constructs and hypotheses rather than arising from the data itself (Mayring, 2001).

The focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then manually coded in Excel. The deductive coding process followed predefined categories based on theoretical frameworks, ensuring a structured and transparent analysis. Relevant text passages were assigned to the categories to systematically identify patterns and recurring themes.

The theoretical concepts presented in chapters 3.1 - 3.4 were used as the foundation for the coding scheme. Four main categories were derived from these theories:

(1) The influence of social media on consumption pressure

(2) Brand values and self-identity

(3) Short-term vs. long-term identity functions

(4) Individuality vs. conformity.

These categories structured the analysis and helped to examine how Gen Z navigates consumer culture and how consumption shapes their identity formation.

These categories guided the analysis and helped examine how Gen Z navigates consumer culture and shapes their identity through consumption. The coding scheme and transcripts are available in Appendix 4.

5 Results

The following section presents the results based on the four thematic blocks, illustrating recurring patterns and differences between participant responses. The analysis shows how social media, group norms, and personal values shape Gen Z's consumption behavior and identity formation.

5.1 Social Media Influence on Consumption Pressure

Instagram has emerged as the most frequently used platform. In fact, most people use it several times a day to stay in touch with friends, consume entertainment and follow trends (B6, B3, A3, C4). It serves both as a means of communication and as a source of inspiration for fashion, lifestyle and personal interests. Several individuals indicated that utilizing the app has become a fundamental aspect of their daily routine (B6, A3, C4). TikTok was frequently cited as a source of entertainment and inspiration. A number of participants reported that they frequently lose track of time while using the platform. They examine elements such as product evaluations, trip recommendations, fashion material, funny videos, and practical life advice (B2, B3, A5, B4, C1). One participant emphasized that TikTok felt more authentic than traditional search engines because of the user-generated content (C5). The duration of social media use varied

greatly. While some participants stated that they spend around 30 minutes a day on Instagram (B5), the majority described being active on several platforms for several hours a day (B2, B3, A5).

H1: Social comparison on social media increases perceived consumption pressure among Gen Z.

Participants reported that social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok facilitated upward social comparison, where individuals measured themselves against those perceived as more successful or affluent. They described feeling pressure to align with the idealized lifestyles presented online. Many participants stated that observing others' possessions, lifestyles, and achievements on social media increased the perceived need to purchase similar products to match these idealized representations (C1, C6, B3). As one participant described it, *"It feels like everyone else has more, experiences more, and I start thinking I need those things too."* (C1)

Participants reported experiencing pressure in several key areas. In fashion and appearance, repeated exposure to certain brands and styles made them feel the need to conform to trends (B3, C1). Luxury and status symbols were linked to social standing and influenced participants' brand preferences (B6). Influencer-promoted beauty standards created pressure to match idealized looks, sometimes leading to feelings of inadequacy when their own appearance fell short of these ideals (A3, C1). Some participants felt the need to stay updated by adopting new technology devices and gadgets to avoid feeling left behind (C2, B6). Similarly, posts about travel, leisure, and career success made participants feel inadequate and under pressure to match the perceived lifestyle and achievements of others (C1, C6, B2). Figure 2 illustrates how social media exposure and social comparison contribute to perceived consumption pressure across these key areas.

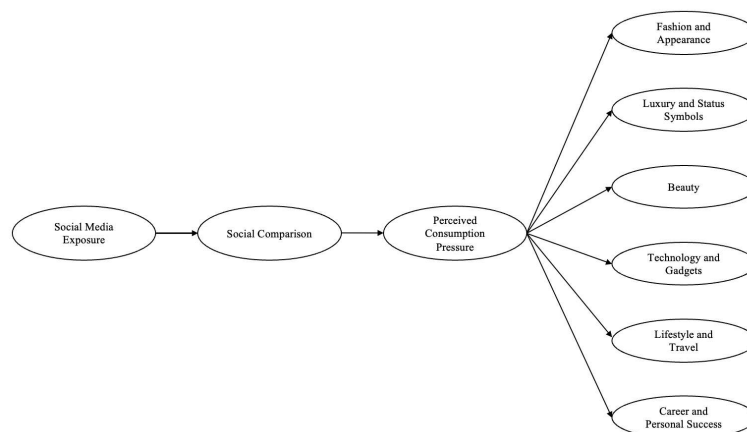


Figure 2. Impact of Social Media Exposure and Social Comparison

Participants reported that peer influence contributed to these pressures. Seeing friends or acquaintances adopt certain brands or products increased their perceived value and made participants feel pressure to follow the trend to maintain social inclusion (C5, B6).

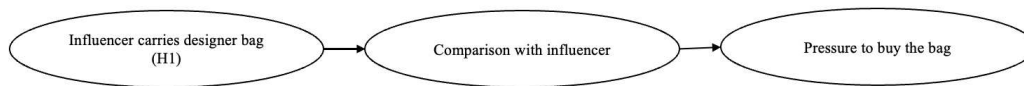


Figure 3. Example of Social Comparison

Participants experienced both motivation and frustration due to social comparison. While some reported feeling inspired and motivated, as one participant noted, *"It's not always negative—it sometimes motivates me to set higher goals for myself."* (B2), others described feelings of inferiority, stress and dissatisfaction caused by unrealistic comparisons (B2, C3).

Observation: Female participants reported that they were more influenced by social comparison on social media, particularly in the realms of fashion, attractiveness, and lifestyle. They experienced greater pressure to match idealized standards promoted by influencers and peers, whereas male participants were less influenced by such comparisons and reported feeling less pressure to conform to these standards.

H2: Repeated exposure to consumer-oriented content on social media leads to an increase in purchasing behavior among Gen Z.

Participants reported that repeated exposure to products on platforms like Instagram and TikTok increased the likelihood of purchasing, even when initial interest was low (C2, A5, B5).

They stated that social media algorithms increased product visibility and familiarity, making products appear more desirable and socially accepted over time (C2, A5). Participants described feeling more comfortable with products after repeated exposure, which increased the likelihood of purchasing. As one participant explained, *"I kept seeing ads for this one product over and over again, and at some point, I was like, 'Okay, fine, I'll buy it.'"* (C2)

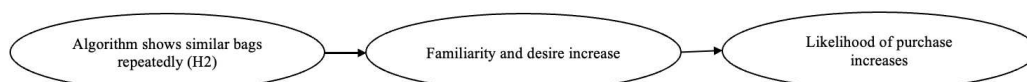


Figure 4. Example of Repeated Exposure

Participants reported that influencer recommendations increased the likelihood of purchasing, especially when influencers were perceived as trustworthy and selective with their partnerships (A3, C5). As one participant noted, *"If it's someone I've been following for a while and they say a product is good, I'm more likely to give it a try."* (C5) The perceived authenticity of influencer endorsements increased trust and encouraged participants to try recommended products. Some participants, however, described growing skepticism toward influencer marketing when they sensed that recommendations were primarily commercially driven (A4, C3).

Participants stated that the combination of repeated exposure, platform design (e.g., swipe-up links), and perceived exclusivity influenced quick and emotional purchases (B3, B6). As one participant explained, *"It's so tempting when you see something that looks good, and with one tap, it's in your cart."* (B3) Fear of missing out was another factor identified as a trigger to impulse purchasing, particularly in the context of limited-edition products. Several participants expressed regret post-purchase, especially if the products failed to meet their expectations or the initial enthusiasm diminished (C5, B3). Figure 3 demonstrates that repeated exposure to algorithms increases familiarity and desire. Raising the likelihood of purchase through mechanisms like social validation, increased trust, and FOMO.

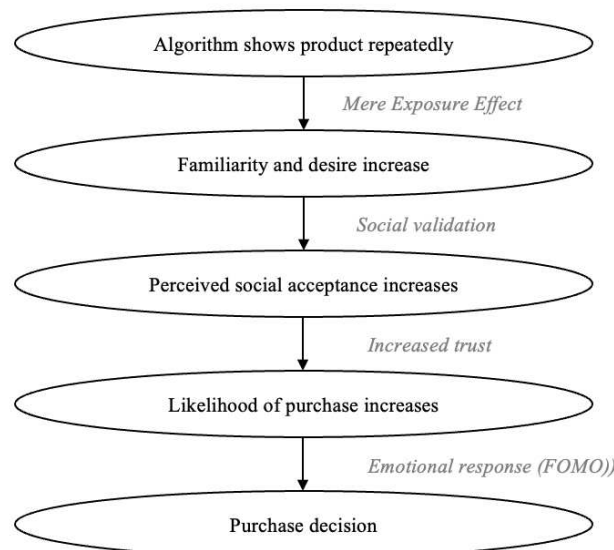


Figure 5. Path from Algorithm Exposure to Purchase Decision

Given the influence of repeated exposure, certain participants expressed their capacity to actively resist the impulse for consumption. This is capable due to their prioritization on long-term values above short-term trends (B2, C4). As one participant noted, *"If I wasn't on*

Instagram or TikTok, I probably wouldn't even know about half of these products. Without social media, I'd definitely buy less." (B5) Others recognized that they would likely reduce their consumption in without the use of social media. This is because the need for products is exacerbated by their recurrent visibility (B5, C2). Similarly, it is possible that a product is exclusively introduced through social media.

Observation: Many participants recognize the influence of social media on their consumption behavior but express a desire to distance themselves from it more consciously. At the same time, it becomes clear that while social expectations and trends play a role, participants increasingly wish to find ways to consume more intentionally and independently.

5.2 Individuality and Conformity

H1: Gen Z perceives their consumption choices as more influenced by social conformity than by individuality.

Participants reported that consumption serves both as a means of self-definition and social integration for Generation Z.

They described navigating this balance in different ways. Most participants aimed to maintain their personal identity without standing out too much or attracting negative attention. They reported adopting trends but adjusting them to reflect their personal taste, seeking a balance between fitting in and expressing themselves. Rather than striving for extreme uniqueness, they prioritized feeling comfortable in their own style (B1, B6, A1).

"It's not about being super unique – I just want my style to reflect who I am." (A1)

"I follow trends, but I always try to add my own spin." (B6)

"I try to stand out a little – but not too much. I don't want to attract negative attention." (C4)

Group identity, social norms, and the desire to maintain social inclusion were described as strong influences on Generation Z's consumption choices. Many participants reported buying certain products because they were popular within their social group or frequently appeared on social media (A5, A2, C1). As one participant explained, *"I bought a PlayStation not because I really wanted one, but because all my friends had one." (B2)* Some participants stated that following trends provided emotional validation and reinforced their sense of connection within their peer group.

This group dynamic becomes particularly evident in situations of uncertainty. When unsure about a product, many participants tend to follow group behavior because it seems like a safer choice. As one participant noted, *"If I'm not sure whether something is good, I rely on what others are doing – if everyone is wearing it, it must be good."* (B4)

Self-assessment data reflects the distinction between perceived individuality and social conformity. On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = not individual at all, 10 = highly individual), most participants rated themselves at 5 or below, suggesting that their consumption style is more influenced by group behavior than personal uniqueness. A smaller group rated themselves between 5 and 6, reflecting a mixed perception of individuality and social alignment. Only a few participants rated themselves at 7 or higher, describing their style as more independent and less shaped by trends.

A smaller group of participants consciously distances themselves from trends to preserve their individuality (B1, C4, A6). For some, seeing a product everywhere is enough to avoid it altogether. As one participant explained, *"If I see something everywhere, I tend to avoid it for that reason alone."* (A6)

Some participants described distancing themselves from trends to preserve their individuality, particularly when they defined their identity through non-material values. One participant stated that they do not want their identity to be defined by brands or products: *"I don't want my identity to be tied to brands or products."* (A6)

Observation: Many participants expressed a desire to show more individuality in their consumption choices but felt constrained by social norms and group behavior. The need to conform was described as limiting their ability to fully express their identity. This creates tension between the desire for social acceptance and the need for personal authenticity.

5.3 Role of Brand Values in Identity Formation

H1: GenZ desires alignment between their personal values and brand values.

Generation Z's purchasing behavior appeared to be influenced by the alignment between brand values and personal identity, though the strength and consistency of this alignment varied. The data for this analysis can be found in Appendix 3.

Sustainability, minimalism, and performance were frequently mentioned as areas where alignment between personal and brand values was particularly strong. Participants who engaged in outdoor activities or sports consistently favored brands like Patagonia for their environmental responsibility and product durability, which they described as aligning with both environmental and personal priorities, influencing purchasing decisions (C2, A2).

Minimalism and timelessness were also identified as strong influencing factors, especially among participants who preferred a "clean" and "functional" style (C3, B6). Brands like Lululemon and COS were valued for their classic designs and durable materials, reflecting participants' preference for simplicity and long-term use.

Performance and functionality were important for participants engaged in sports and fitness (A1, A2). Brands like Gymshark and Patagonia were favored for their comfort, durability, and performance, aligning well with participants' active lifestyles. Respondents who identified as athletes showed the strongest consistency in choosing brands that fit their lifestyle and performance needs. As one participant explained, *"For me, a brand needs to be performance-driven and practical. That's why I like Gymshark—it fits well and lasts through training sessions."* (A1)

The alignment with brand values was not always consistent. Aesthetic appeal, social influence, and practical factors such as price and availability frequently overtook personal values. While participants recognized the importance of sustainability and ethical production, they ultimately prioritized design and style when making purchasing decisions (A4, C4). According to several participants, sustainability was more important for long-term, high-quality purchases than it was for cheaper or trend-driven goods (B3, C3). Social influence also played a role, as some participants admitted to purchasing popular products despite the fact that they did not align with their personal values (C5, B4). Practical considerations like cost and availability were frequently described as more influential than value alignment, particularly when sustainable options were more expensive or harder to find (B2, A5).

"I care about sustainability, but if it's a small purchase, I'm not going to stress about it." (B3)

"Sometimes I buy something because everyone else has it, even if it's not aligned with my values." (C5)

Skepticism toward sustainability claims was also mentioned as a barrier to value-based purchasing. When participants perceived sustainability as a marketing tactic rather than a

genuine effort, they were less likely to trust the brand or pay a premium for its products (B1, A6).

H2: Brand choice serves as a means for Gen Z to achieve social identification and belonging.

Generation Z's brand choices appeared to be strongly influenced by social identity and group affiliation. The need to feel part of a social group was frequently mentioned as a key factor behind brand choices. For many participants, aligning with group norms through specific brands provided a sense of acceptance and social security.

Brands were described as social and status markers. Wearing luxury or exclusive brands positively influenced how others perceived participants, reinforcing their social standing within their peer group (B2, B4, C1). Products such as Apple devices or designer bags were associated with a certain lifestyle and created a sense of belonging. Displaying certain brands was described as signaling group membership and reinforcing acceptance within a peer group. As one participant noted, *"When I wear expensive bags or my Stanley Cup, people automatically associate me with a certain lifestyle."* (C1) In some cases, participants reported choosing a brand for its social significance rather than product quality, even when they were aware that other brands offered better performance or value.

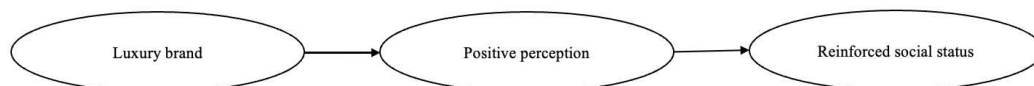


Figure 6. Luxury Brands and Social Status

Brand avoidance was also mentioned as a form of social signaling. Some participants said they purposefully avoided some brands because of their ideological mismatch or unfavorable societal associations. Even when participants like the product, they deliberately avoided brands associated with problematic social groups or unethical business activities (C2, A3). As one participant noted, *"I avoid Fred Perry because it's linked to right-wing groups, even though I like some of their designs."* (C2) Participants characterized brand choices as a tool to uphold personal integrity and social values in addition to reinforcing individuality.

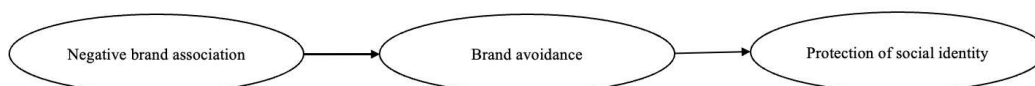


Figure 7. Brand Avoidance and Social Identity Protection

Some participants stated that they were able to exhibit their individualism while strengthening their group membership by selecting brands that matched their own identities. For respondents who were active in fitness, sports and performance brands were especially significant because they conveyed a sense of social belonging and personal values (B6, A1). As one participant explained, *"I bought Autry sneakers because people in my social circle were wearing them—it wasn't pressure, but it feels good to be part of that group."* (A1)

Observation: Participants talked about how social pressure and group identification affected their brand choices, making it difficult to remain loyal to their principles. Making consistent, value-based decisions was challenging since, even when they prioritized sustainability or quality, the requirement for social acceptance.

5.4 Balancing Short-Term Trends and Long-Term Goals

H1: Gen Z places high value on being among the first to adopt trends.

Early adoption held limited appeal for most participants, who preferred to assess trends before committing to them.

The majority of respondents stated that they prefer to observe how a trend develops and how others adopt and use it before deciding whether to follow it (C1, C6, B3, B4). Participants expressed hesitation about being early adopters, particularly due to the potential for regret if the trend fades quickly or the product fails to meet expectations (C5, B2). Some explained that they feel more confident purchasing a product after it has gained wider acceptance and positive feedback from others. As one participant noted, *"I prefer to wait and see how a trend develops. Once I see how people respond to it, I feel more comfortable buying it."* (C1)

A small percentage expressed interest in setting trends, particularly in fashion and technology, even though early adoption was not often given priority. Early adoption in fashion was associated with feelings of exclusivity and social distinction, with participants noting that being ahead of the curve reinforced their sense of style and identity (B6, A3). In contrast, a few participants reported greater excitement about being early adopters of new technology, such as smartphones or gadgets, where innovation and functionality played a larger role than social visibility: *"The only time I get excited about being early to something is when it comes to tech—like a new phone or some cool gadget."* (B1)

Trusted recommendations increased the likelihood of early adoption. Some participants mentioned that while they are not actively driven to be the first to try new products, they are more likely to follow a trend or try a product if it comes highly recommended by someone they trust (A4). Participants highlighted personal endorsement and social proof as factors that increased confidence and decreased perceived risk when making purchases.

For the majority of participants, long-term value and product quality continued to have a greater impact than trend adoption. According to the respondents, they would rather spend their money on long-lasting goods that complement their own style than chasing trends (A1, C2, B5). Value and consistency were more important to the majority of participants than the appeal of being the first to adopt the new trend.

H2: Gen Z aspires to long-term values but often follows short-term trends.

Generation Z expressed a desire to align their purchasing behavior with long-term values such as sustainability, quality, and consistency.

Many participants described wanting to make more long-term-oriented purchases, particularly for high-quality products that are long-lasting. Some participants reported prioritizing durable, versatile items that could integrate well into their personal and unique style rather than constantly following new trends (C2, B4, B6). As one participant explained, *"I try to mix trendy and timeless pieces so that my wardrobe doesn't feel outdated too quickly."* (B6)

Despite this aspiration for long-term value, short-term trends and social pressure remained highly influential in shaping purchasing behavior. Many participants admitted to occasionally buying trend-based items even when they knew the products might not align with their long-term style or values. As one participant admitted, *"Sometimes, I still buy trendy things even if they don't match my long-term goals."* (C1)

Social media was frequently mentioned as a factor influencing this behavior (see effects H2 in chapter 5.1). The constant exposure to trends on platforms like Instagram and TikTok increased the temptation to make short-term purchase decisions, often pushing long-term goals in the background. Some participants reported regret over trend-based purchases, realizing afterward that these items didn't reflect their personal style or long-term values.

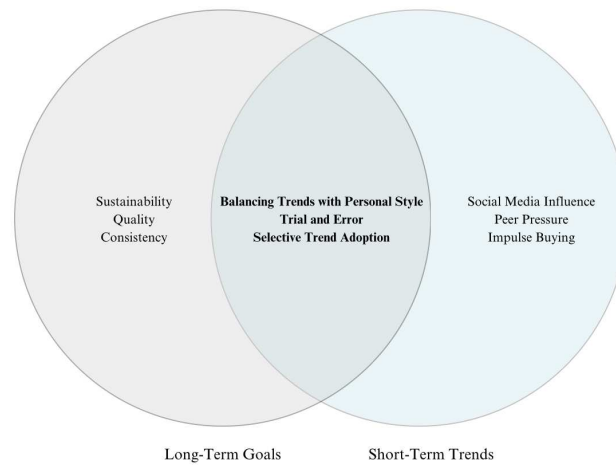


Figure 8. Tension Between Long-Term Goals and Short-Term Trends

Striking a balance between long-term stylistic consistency and trends was a recurrent theme. Some participants talked about taking a "trial and error" approach, avoiding fleeting fads and only embracing trends that fit with their larger personality. This balancing act is depicted in Figure 8, which shows how Gen Z deliberately strikes a balance between short-term, social media-driven trends and long-term objectives like consistency, quality, and sustainability. As one participant explained, *"I try to follow trends that I know will last—things that work with my style rather than just what's popular."* (A3) This awareness led some participants to become more cautious about following trends in the future and to place greater focus on making purchases that align with their long-term goals and personal style.

Observation: Many participants expressed a desire to shift from impulsive consumption to more sustainable and deliberate purchasing decisions, with this shift being particularly noticeable among older participants.

5.5 Additional Observations

Additional information on participants' attitudes towards consumption and social pressure was revealed through nonverbal communication during the focus group talks. A number of individuals showed indications of hesitancy or uneasiness while talking about trend-based purchases, like avoiding eye contact, stopping before responding or moving in their seats. This behavior suggested a possible internal conflict between personal values and social pressure. Shared experiences were reflected in nonverbal agreement—nods, smiles, and verbal affirmations such as "exactly" or "same" were frequently observed when participants discussed the pressure to follow trends, indicating a sense of mutual understanding within the group.

Some participants displayed uncomfortable behaviours, such as nervous laughing, crossed arms, or fidgeting, while thinking back on disappointing trend-based purchases. These behaviours could indicate feelings of vulnerability or regret. Similar to this, when asked explicitly about the impact of peer pressure and social media, several participants provided brief answers, avoided making direct eye contact, or hesitated before answering, indicating a reluctance to publicly admit the magnitude of this influence.

6 Discussion

This chapter situates the focus group findings within the broader research on consumer behavior and identity formation. By exploring how Generation Z manages the balance between social conformity and personal authenticity, this section identifies key influences on consumption pressure, the impact of brand values, and the tension between short-term trends and long-term identity goals to derive meaningful insights into Gen Z's consumption patterns.

6.1 Main Findings

RQ 1 *"In what ways do Social Media like Instagram and TikTok intensify consumption pressure among Gen Z?"*

The present study was initially grounded in Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the Mere Exposure Effect (Zajonc, 1968), which provided a strong framework for understanding how social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok shape consumption pressure among Generation Z. The findings clearly support the assumption that upward social comparison and repeated exposure to idealized content increase the perceived need to consume in order to maintain social relevance.

Although the main conclusions are consistent with accepted theoretical frameworks, some participant response patterns imply that other psychological processes might affect how consumption pressure is felt. Consumption pressure was not exclusively bad, according to some people. In some instances, it acted as inspiration to raise their social status or fit in with their personal fashion objectives. Individual variances in media literacy and self-esteem may be the cause of this fluctuation, indicating that Generation Z's psychological reaction to social comparison may not be consistent. While those with low self-esteem are more likely to feel inadequate and under pressure to consume, those with high self-esteem are more likely to see upward social comparison as incentive, according to Aspinwall and Taylor (1993).

Similarly, Livingstone and Helsper (2007) suggest that higher media literacy enhances individuals' ability to critically engage with content and resist manipulative strategies, which may help certain individuals feel less overwhelmed by consumption pressure.

This implies that the general propensity to match consumption to societal standards can be explained by societal Comparison Theory; however, the moderating effects of media literacy and self-esteem suggest a more customised response. Dopamine release may be increased and obsessive behaviour reinforced by unexpected incentives, such as finding appealing things on social media.

RQ 2 *“How does Generation Z navigate the tension between individuality and conformity in their consumption choices?”*

This study shows that while making purchasing decisions, Generation Z seeks a compromise between societal conformity and uniqueness. While Self-Concept Theory (Belk, 1988) emphasises how consumerism is used to express individuality, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1971) explains why the need for social belonging motivates conformity to group norms. The results show that individuals intentionally match their consumption habits to the expectations of the group to be accepted by others while yet trying to maintain their authentic self.

The focus groups supported the assumption that individuals define their identity through membership in social groups and tend to align their consumption choices with group norms to strengthen social belonging (Hornsey, 2008), as many participants reported purchasing products to align with their social group while adapting them to reflect their personal style. However, some participants deliberately avoided popular trends to maintain a sense of uniqueness, contradicting the theory's assumption that group conformity is the dominant driver of consumption. This suggests that Generation Z engages more critically with consumer culture than the theory anticipates. Likewise, other individuals based their sense of self more on their values, interests, and accomplishments instead of on their material belongings. This contradicts the Self-Concept Theory (Belk, 1988), which holds that the main way people express themselves is through consuming. Material possessions are becoming less significant identification markers for Generation Z than authenticity and connection with personal ideals (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This shift reflects a stronger emphasis on aligning consumption

choices with personal beliefs and lifestyle rather than relying on material possessions as the primary source of identity.

This generation actively balances social alignment with personal authenticity, suggesting that value-based and reflective consumption patterns are becoming increasingly important. These insights offer valuable implications for brands, particularly regarding authenticity and value-driven marketing strategies.

RQ 3 *"How do brand values influence Gen Z's self-identity and purchasing decisions?"*

This study confirms that Generation Z balances between aligning their consumption choices with personal values and meeting practical demands. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1971) explains why the need for social belonging drives conformity to group norms, while Self-Concept Theory (Belk, 1988) highlights how consumption is used to express individuality. The findings reveal that participants consciously select brands that reflect values such as sustainability, authenticity, and social responsibility while simultaneously considering practical factors like price, design, and convenience.

This indicates that Gen Z comes across a strategic dilemma between the alignment of values and situational demands. Creating an imbalance between idealism and pragmatism in their consumption decisions. This tension illustrates a cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) between value-oriented and outcome-oriented decision-making. While Gen Z seeks to express their identity through value alignment, practical constraints such as affordability and convenience create internal conflict, forcing a strategic trade-off between idealism and realism.

Moreover, the findings confirm that brand choice serves as a means for Gen Z to achieve social identification and belonging. According to Hornsey (2008), in-group favoritism increases social cohesion and strengthens the perception of group identity. This implies that the alignment between personal identity and brand values reinforces both social belonging and self-expression.

Overall, the findings highlight that Generation Z engages with brand values selectively, using them to reinforce both personal identity and social belonging. While authenticity and value alignment are important drivers of purchasing decisions, practical benefits and social acceptance remain influential factors.

RQ 4 *„How does Generation Z distinguish between short-term identity functions and long-term identity goals through their consumption choices?“*

This study confirms that Generation Z strategically balances short-term trend adoption and their long-term identity goals. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1971) explains why Gen Z adopts trends to gain social approval and signal group belonging, while the Self-Concept Theory (Belk, 1988) highlights how long-term identity goals are reinforced through value-driven consumption. The findings show that participants consciously adopt trends to enhance their social status, while simultaneously seeking to preserve personal authenticity and value alignment.

According to Vinson et al. (1977) and Reimann et al. (2012), values influence consumer decisions, which was confirmed by the findings. However, short-term trends often conflict with long-term values such as sustainability and quality. Some participants reported that social pressure and media exposure led to impulsive, trend-based purchases that later felt misaligned with their core identity. This suggests a cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) between the desire for social acceptance and the need for personal authenticity—a dual motivation that influences Gen Z’s consumption decisions. Others stated that they successfully resisted short-term influences and maintained consistency with their long-term values, highlighting the growing importance of authenticity in shaping identity.

At the same time, the findings suggest that Gen Z is becoming more aware of the benefits of long-term consistency. While short-term adaptation is often socially rewarded, Gen Z increasingly strives to make long-term decisions, recognizing that they better reflect their values and identity. This displays a strategic approach to consumption in which the requirement for authenticity and personal integrity is balanced with the adoption of short-term trends.

Before choosing a more consistent consumption pattern, some participants said they used short-term trends to experiment with various facets of their identities. This implies that short-term consumption is a strategy for identity exploration and improvement in addition to being motivated by social pressure. This highlights Gen Z’s raising awareness of how aligning consumption with core values fosters a more coherent and stable sense of self over time.

The Dynamics of Consumption and Identity

The diagram illustrates the dynamic interplay between the central theoretical concepts of this study. The findings demonstrate that these theories cannot be considered in isolation; rather, they operate in a complex, mutually reinforcing relationship. Figure 9 visualizes how Social Comparison Theory, Social Identity Theory, Self-Concept Theory, and Consumer Psychology interact to shape Gen Z's consumption behavior and identity formation.

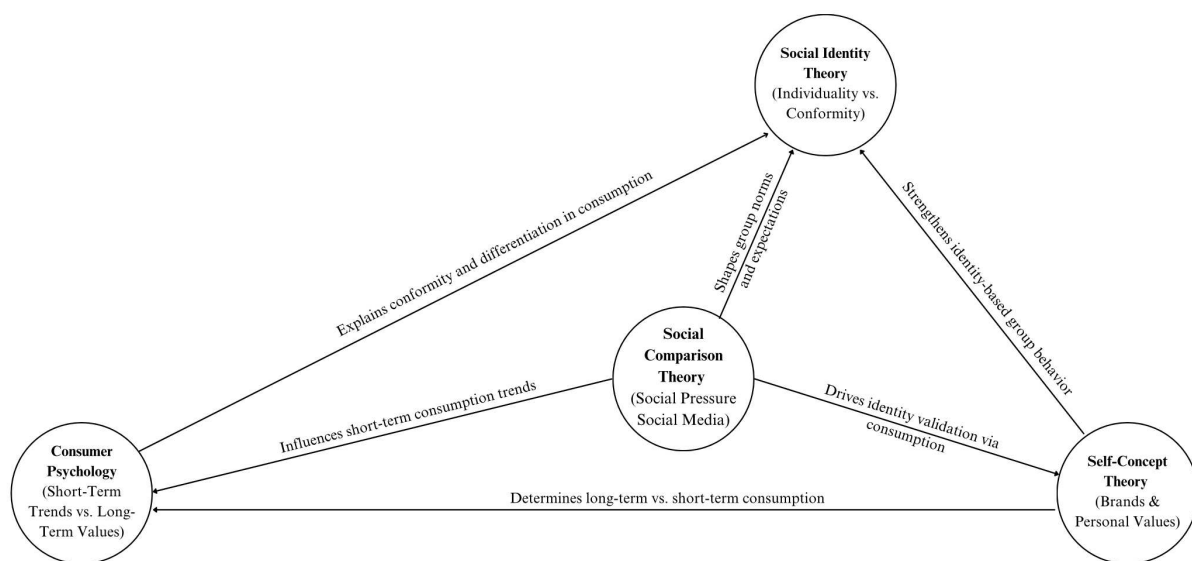


Figure 9. Dynamics of Consumption and Identity

Social Comparison Theory ↔ Social Identity Theory

According to Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, social media encourages continual comparison with idealized lifestyles, which in turn increases consumption pressure. Expanding on this, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1971) demonstrates that these comparisons reinforce the need for group affiliation in addition to generating social pressure. The graphic emphasizes how the need for social approval and the desire to fit in with the group's norms frequently impact purchasing decisions.

Self-Concept Theory ↔ Social Identity Theory

Self-Concept Theory (Belk, 1988) posits that consumption serves as a means of self-expression and identity formation. However, the findings reveal that this self-definition frequently clashes with the drive for social acceptance (Social Identity Theory). The diagram illustrates that

Generation Z navigates a strategic balance between personal authenticity and social alignment when making consumption choices.

Consumer Psychology ↔ Self-Concept Theory

Consumer Psychology examines how Generation Z navigates the conflict between ephemeral trends and enduring identity aspirations. The results indicate that short-term consumption choices are influenced by social pressure (Social Comparison Theory), whereas long-term adherence to principles like sustainability and excellence is grounded in personal identity (Self-Concept Theory).

The diagram underscores the constant interaction between these theories:

- Social comparison reinforces group conformity and increases consumption pressure (Social Comparison Theory ↔ Social Identity Theory).
- Brand choice reflects both personal identity and the desire for social recognition (Self-Concept Theory ↔ Social Identity Theory).
- Short-term adaptation to trends often conflicts with long-term identity consistency (Consumer Psychology ↔ Self-Concept Theory).

The findings demonstrate that consumption behavior results from the mutual reinforcement of these mechanisms as social comparison drives consumption pressure, group conformity shapes brand preferences, and personal values guide long term identity development. Gen Z strategically balances social alignment with personal authenticity when making consumption decisions.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations related to the study design and methodology should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the sample size and composition may limit the generalizability of the findings. The focus groups were likely not large enough to be representative of the entire Generation Z population, and self-selection bias, meaning that individuals with a particular interest in consumption or social media were more likely to take part, may have influenced the results. In addition, the cultural and geographical focus on Germany limits the applicability of the results to other cultures with different social norms and values.

The reliance on self-report carries the risk of social desirability bias, as participants may have given answers that they considered socially acceptable. The qualitative nature of the focus groups also limits the ability to measure the extent of the observed impact or to apply the results to a wider population without further quantitative validation.

The study's simplified model may not fully reflect the complexity of the relationship between consumer behaviour, social identity and self-concept. External factors such as economic conditions, technological developments and cultural differences could further influence these dynamics and have not been fully considered.

The study reflects consumer behaviour at a single point in time. However, consumption patterns and identity formation are dynamic and can change over time. A long-term study could shed light on whether the observed behaviours are stable or change in line with societal trends.

Participants may have overestimated the value of certain products or brands due to the halo effect, where positive feelings of influencers or brand associations influence product perception. Personality types such as introversion, the need for uniqueness and risk-taking, which could affect the relationship between social comparison and consumption, were not taken into account. Furthermore, the study may have overemphasised consumption as a driving force for identity formation and overlooked other influences such as career, education and relationships.

Future research should aim to increase sample size and diversity, explore more complex models, and test the findings across different cultural contexts and media platforms to enhance their generalizability.

6.3 Implications for Future Research

Although the study confirms that Generation Z deals with a conflict between social conformity and uniqueness, it is still unclear whether gender differences play a role. Compared to men, women reported feeling more pressure to compare themselves to others, especially regarding their lifestyle and physical appearance. Future studies could examine if psychological characteristics, media representations, or societal norms are a potential cause. A closer look at socioeconomic and cultural variations may help explain why women are subjected to more comparison pressure.

Further research is also needed to fully understand the ambivalence of consumer pressure. Some individuals reported feeling motivated by social comparison, even though it frequently causes them stress. The circumstances under which consumption pressure turns into motivation rather than harm could be the subject of future studies. It is important to investigate how platform-specific algorithms, social connectedness, and self-esteem affect this effect.

Consumer loyalty and trust have been found to be significantly influenced by brand authenticity. However, it's unknown how Generation Z responds when real business practices (like greenwashing) clash with brand messaging. Research could examine how brands can regain their credibility and analyse the tipping point at which perceived discrepancies weaken consumers trust. It's important to investigate how paid influencers and partnerships can either strengthen or decrease authenticity.

According to this study, Gen Z favors companies that share their values, such as sustainability. It's still unknown, at what price point customers stop caring about sustainability and stop buying, even if their values correspond. Future studies could examine how cultural variations affect this behavior and whether there is a point at which perceived authenticity no longer warrants a higher price.

6.4 Implications for Consumers

Generation Z is becoming more aware of how social media is influencing their consumption habits. Increased media competence and critical thinking could help consumers make more conscious purchasing decisions and resist social comparison pressure. By understanding how advertising and algorithms influence the visibility of content, consumers could be able to use social media more mindfully. Influencers and peer networks play an important role in shaping consumption habits. Developing a more critical approach towards influencer marketing and identifying when content is staged or manipulated could reduce impulsive buying behaviour and increase alignment with personal values.

Price sensitivity remains a crucial factor. While Generation Z is willing to pay a premium for sustainable products, this willingness has its limits when costs become too high or product quality as well as design do not meet their expectations. Educating consumers about the long-term benefits of sustainable products, such as longevity and ethical production, could increase their willingness to invest in more expensive products. Clear information on production and social impact could increase consumer trust in sustainable brands.

Greater awareness of the emotional triggers of consumption, such as the fear of missing out, could help consumers avoid reactive spending and make more conscious purchasing decisions. Recognizing the difference between genuine content and staged marketing could further reduce the psychological strain caused by social comparison. Developing a stronger sense of identity and personal values could help consumers navigate consumption pressure more confidently and align their purchasing behavior with long-term goals.

6.5 Implications for Marketers

Gen Z prefers brands that reflect their personal values, such as sustainability and social responsibility. However, authenticity plays a critical role in sustaining consumer trust. When brand messaging does not align with actual business practices, customers quickly lose their trust (Greenwashing). Authenticity comes from transparent communication and consistent action throughout the entire value chain.

To maintain credibility and build a strong connection with consumers, brands must align their messaging with actual business practices and maintain transparency across all channels. Authentic content that reflects real experiences and diverse voices can make brand communication more relatable and trustworthy. Working with micro-influencers that reflect the brand's core values can further strengthen trust and deepen the customer's emotional connection to the brand. Consumers are more willing to interact with influencers they perceive as authentic, which strengthens long-term brand loyalty.

Gen Z is willing to pay a premium for sustainable and ethically produced products, but this willingness to pay has limits. When prices exceed a certain level, emphasis on value becomes less important than affordability. Brands need to find these thresholds to avoid losing price-conscious consumers. One way to deal with this is to offer a red variety of products that cover different budgets without sacrificing the basic principles.

In addition, appearance remains an important aspect for Generation Z customers. The products not only need to be sustainable, but also visually appealing and compete with trendy alternatives. It is unlikely that consumers will sacrifice design just for the sake of sustainability. Brands should strive for a balance between sustainable practices and modern, trendy design to ensure that eco-friendly products can compete with mainstream alternatives, especially in terms of appearance and appeal.

For Generation Z, consumption is not only a means of expressing their identity, but also a way of signalling belonging. Brands that create a sense of community through membership programmes, exclusive events and co-creation opportunities can strengthen emotional bonds and reinforce social identity. Collaborations with influencers and user-generated content further reinforce this sense of belonging and give consumers the feeling of being part of a larger group.

To summarise, brands that align their values with those of Generation Z, maintain consistent communication and create a sense of community will have a competitive advantage. Balancing price sensitivity with value orientation and using social media as a platform for authentic engagement rather than pressure-driven comparisons will be key factors in building sustainable relationships with this consumer group.

7 References

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8 Appendix

Appendix 1: Introduction Participants

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Description
A1	M	21	Management student, sports enthusiast, enjoys gym and various physical activities.
A2	M	26	Works in procurement, studying Business Administration, enjoys strength training, cooking, reading, football, and traveling.
A3	F	25	Team Lead, passionate about fitness, reading, decorating, baking, and fashion.
A4	F	23	Master's student, enjoys going out, staying active (gym), fashion, and reading.
A5	F	25	Master's student in International Management, active lifestyle (running, Pilates, boot camp workouts), enjoys socializing and dining out.
A6	M	26	Commercial Product Manager in IT, background in Business Administration (Digital Business Management), passionate about music and traveling.
B1	M	22	Works in corporate sustainability communications in the automotive industry, passionate about traveling and sports.
B2	M	23	Student, Enjoys gaming and sports.
B3	F	19	Student, passionate about fashion, practices yoga, and regularly goes to the gym.
B4	F	26	Works in marketing, enjoys shopping, fitness, going out with friends, and DIY projects.
B5	M	24	Engineer in quality management, pursuing a master's in industrial engineering, enjoys going to the gym and socializing.
B6	M	19	Works in fashion retail, passionate about styling trends, enjoys exploring new fashion collections, fitness, and photography.
C1	F	18	Works as an executive assistant, Pilates, enjoys socializing and spending time with friends.
C2	M	24	Works part-time in retail after finishing a master's degree, enjoys outdoor activities, working out, and socializing.
C3	F	25	Works in Performance and Talent to Value Management, passionate about talent development, enjoys yoga, jogging, and spending time with family and friends.
C4	F	22	Product designer in consulting, thrives in dynamic work environments, enjoys playing tennis to unwind.
C5	F	25	Social media manager, passionate about digital content but values offline time, enjoys baking sourdough bread and singing.
C6	M	21	Business administration student, loves playing football, working out, watching series, and exploring interesting topics on YouTube.

Appendix 2: Self-Assessment of Participants' Individuality

Participant ID	Evaluation	Reason
A1	6	Tries to mix things up but doesn't go out of his way to be different. Prefers a sporty or casual style with good taste and doesn't want to seem boring.
A2	5	Style is very trend-dependent, mostly wearing fashionable items but still making them her own in some way.
A3	4	Expresses herself through purchases and activities but doesn't consider herself highly individual. Wears and uses brands/products that are common among girls her age.
A4	2	Doesn't feel she stands out much compared to others. Wears common brands but believes she still expresses herself through them, even if they don't set her apart.
A5	5	Doesn't have particularly unique hobbies or clothing styles but doesn't feel like he completely blends in either.
A6	6	Doesn't live a particularly original lifestyle or wear particularly original clothes but also doesn't consciously strive for individuality.
B1	7	Doesn't actively try to be different but naturally gravitates toward non-mainstream choices. Buys what he genuinely likes, not based on trends. Sometimes gets recognized for his style.
B2	6	Prefers comfort and personal taste over trends but doesn't go out of his way to be unique. Believes brands can create a sense of belonging.
B3	5	Doesn't have a distinct style but doesn't follow trends blindly either. Shops at mainstream stores but picks some unique pieces, though nothing too bold.
B4	5	Used to rate herself an 8 but now feels more influenced by social media. Thinks people end up having the same interests and styles due to online influence.
B5	4	Doesn't care about standing out. Chooses clothes for comfort and practicality.
B6	6	Follows fashion trends but adds his own spin. Aims to balance individuality and conformity without standing out too much.
C1	3	Basic clothes can be worn for longer. If I see that many people like something, I get it too, so I don't have to try out new things. People go to the same places and restaurants as everyone else when they see them on social media.
C2	4	The style doesn't feel particularly special, as it aligns with that of friends. Football and gym visits are part of the routine, just like for almost everyone else.
C3	4	Not necessarily very individual.
C4	6	Standing out a little is enjoyable, but the style wouldn't be described as completely unique.
C5	5	Somewhere in the middle when it comes to individuality.
C6	4	A mix of different styles—sometimes trendy, sometimes classic. There's no strong intention to stand out, but blending in completely isn't the goal either.

Appendix 3: Comparison of Participants' Brand and Personal Values

Participant ID	Favorite Brand & Why?	Brand Reflecting Personal Values?	If You Were a Brand – Values & Qualities?
A1	Casual but chic, affordable	Gymshark & WRSTBHVR – sporty and urban style, motivation for fitness and progress	Chic, sporty, casual, urban – stylish but effortless
A2	High-performance, stylish, functional	Patagonia – strong commitment to sustainability, durable products	Performance-driven, sustainable, stylish but practical
A3	Broad selection, easy comparison, convenience, flexibility in returns	Pandora – beautiful yet simple jewelry, good quality, personal meaning	Good price-performance ratio, fashionable, not mainstream, a touch of innovation
A4	Timeless, aesthetic, high-quality, soft fabrics, basic yet stylish	No Brand – sustainability & high-quality fabrics	Timeless, high quality, sustainable, authentic
A5	Wide selection, affordable, stylish pieces	No Brand – Minimalist, timeless, sustainable materials, durable & unique pieces	Authenticity, quality, timeless style, confidence, and individuality
A6	Simple, high-quality, functional, not trend-driven	Thomann – great customer service, reliability, goodwill, and quality support	Good value for money, friendly customer service, customer loyalty
B1	Unique, reliable, stylish	VFB – regional, humble, yet stands for success	Responsible, humble, but still very cool
B2	Classic streetwear, inspiring	Manchester City – passion, tradition, and respect	Quality at a reasonable price, style
B3	Timeless aesthetic, high quality, good value for money, designed to last	Apple – innovation, user-friendly design, seamless ecosystem	Good quality, individuality
B4	Quality, timeless, clean	No Brand – ethically produced, long-lasting pieces	High quality, durability, fair and sustainable production, fair pricing
B5	Simple, high-quality basics, no flashy logos, focus on good fabrics, clean looks	No Brand – good quality at a fair price	Quality, longevity, fairness
B6	Minimalist, Scandinavian-inspired designs, clean	No Brand – Simple, high-quality, functionality	A blend of innovation, exclusivity, and timeless style
C1	Affordable, good basics, good quality at a fair price	No Brand – Chooses brands based on quality & style, not values	High quality, fair price-performance ratio, excellent customer service, and timelessness
C2	High-quality, durable, timeless investment pieces	Patagonia – strong social & ecological responsibility, authenticity, and long-lasting products	Social & ecological responsibility, high quality, and authenticity
C3	Flattering fit, great designs for different body shapes	Lululemon – focus on quality, sustainability, and fair working conditions	Quality, inspiration, effortless, and comfort
C4	Buys based on fit, quality, and price rather than brand values	No Brand – shops based on fit, price, and quality, not brand values	High quality at a fair price – no unnecessary hype, just well-made products
C5	Quality, unique	Caia Cosmetics – confidence, authenticity, quality	Quality, trust, passion
C6	Minimalist, good quality, reasonable price, slow collection turnover	Veja – sustainability, simple design	Innovation, reliability, chic

Appendix 4: Coding Scheme

Consumption Pressure Through Social Media

Main Category	Subcategory	Description	Example Quote
Social Comparison	Upward Comparison	Comparing oneself to others (positively or negatively) – feeling superior or inferior based on social media content.	"Sometimes it feels like everyone else has their life figured out, and I'm just trying to finish my degree."
	Feeling of Lack	The feeling of lacking something and the pressure to resolve it through consumption.	"You see influencers who seem to be on vacation all year long, and you start wondering, 'Why am I not doing that?'"
	Source of Inspiration	Social media as a source of inspiration for lifestyle and purchase decisions.	"I use TikTok more for inspiration—fashion, food, and interior ideas."
Algorithm and Repetition	Mere Exposure Effect	Repeated exposure to certain products increases familiarity and perceived necessity.	"I've seen it so many times on Instagram that at some point I thought, 'Okay, maybe I do need this.'"
	Inevitability	Algorithms create the feeling that certain products are unavoidable or necessary.	"TikTok is like my personal Google – I check it first for reviews and tips before I buy something."
Influencer Impact	Trust	Trust in influencer recommendations and product placements.	"If an influencer I trust recommends it, I'm way more likely to believe them."
	Skepticism	Critical attitude towards influencer recommendations and their authenticity.	"A lot of them just promote whatever pays well."
	Excessive Consumption	Increased consumption due to product overexposure by influencers.	"I've definitely bought gadgets that I didn't really need just because they looked cool in an Instagram ad."
Peer Influence	Social Group	Buying decisions influenced by the desire to align with or belong to a social group.	"I've definitely bought sportswear just because I saw it everywhere on Instagram. It's like everyone was wearing it."
	FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)	Fear of missing out on social benefits or status by not buying certain products.	"I saw so many 'Get Ready With Me' videos with the Dyson Airwrap, and I just couldn't resist."

Brands and Personal Values

Main Category	Subcategory	Description	Example Quote
Social Functions of Brands	Self-Expression	How consumers use brands to express their personality and sense of self.	"Some brands really resonate with me, not just for their products but for their overall aesthetic and values."
	Status and Exclusivity	Brands signal social status and differentiation through exclusivity.	"I feel like I express my individuality more through high-end brands because not everyone can afford them."
	Group Membership	Owning certain brands creates a sense of belonging to a social group.	"I got a PlayStation because everyone in my friend group had one."
Values and Brand Decisions	Value-Based Avoidance	Consumers avoid brands that are perceived as inconsistent with their values.	"It became really popular among right-wing groups. I don't want to be associated with that."
	Brand Image Issues	Consumers avoid brands with negative reputations or ethical issues.	"Brands like SHEIN & Co., where it's obviously clear under what conditions the products are manufactured."
	Alignment with Personal Values	Consumers prefer brands that reflect their personal values (e.g., sustainability, ethics).	"I try to buy from brands that are environmentally conscious—it makes me feel like I'm contributing to something good."
	Value Conflict	Consumers buy brands that normally are not aligned with their personal values.	"Sometimes I buy something because everyone else has it, even if it's not aligned with my values."
	Contextual Sustainability	Sustainability is valued in high-end products but plays a minor role in everyday products.	"I care about sustainability, but if it's a small purchase, I'm not going to stress about it."

Short-Term Trends vs. Long-Term Consumption

Main Category	Refined Subcategory	Description	Example Quote
Short-Term Trend Behavior	Trendsetter	Consumers see themselves as trendsetters or are influenced by early adopters and opinion leaders.	"I'd say I enjoy being early to certain fashion trends."
	Short-Term Excitement	The initial thrill or satisfaction from purchasing a new product, which often fades quickly over time.	"It was exciting at first, but now it's just another thing."
	Uncertainty and Risk	Consumers feel uncertain about following new trends or fear making the wrong decision.	"I prefer to wait until there have been some early adopters who can provide reliable reviews."
Long-Term Values	Sustainability	A preference for products and brands that align with environmentally friendly practices and ethical production.	"I try to buy from sustainable brands whenever I can—it's important to me."
	Quality and Durability	Consumers value products that are well-made, last a long time, and provide consistent performance over time.	"I recently bought a winter jacket that I know is a solid long-term investment."
Post-Purchase Conflict	Post-Purchase Regret	Consumers feel regret after a purchase.	"At first, I thought they were cool and fashionable, but later, I realized they didn't really match my personal style, and I felt uncomfortable wearing them."
	Peer Influence Conflict	Feeling discomfort when a purchase is influenced by social pressure rather than personal preference or need.	"I bought it because everyone else had it, but honestly, I don't even like it."

Individuality vs. Conformity

Main Category	Refined Subcategory	Description	Example Quote
Consumption as an Expression of Individuality	Self-Concept	Consumers use brands and products to express their personality and differentiate themselves from others.	"I try to dress in a way that reflects that while still maintaining good taste."
	Personalization	Consumers seek customized or unique products to express individuality.	"It's not about the label—it's more about the way you style something that makes it feel personal."
Social Conformity	Adapting to Group Norms	Consumers align their buying behavior with social norms to feel accepted and secure.	"Sometimes, you need to see something on others before you realize it actually looks good or fits your style."
	Avoiding Exclusion	Fear of missing out or feeling socially isolated drives purchasing decisions.	"At some point, I thought, 'Okay, maybe they don't look that bad.'"
Resistance to Conformity	Rejection of Mainstream	Consumers deliberately reject mainstream products to stand out and assert their individuality.	"The more overhyped something is, the less likely I am to buy it."
	Avoiding Brands	Consumers intentionally avoid brands perceived as too commercial or mainstream.	"I try to avoid buying things just because they're trending. In my opinion, that makes people less unique."

Appendix 5: Introduction text for all FG

Hello and welcome, everyone! I'm so glad you could all make it today. My name is Melina Frank, and I'll be moderating this discussion. I'm really excited to hear your thoughts and experiences as we go through our topics. Before we get started, let me quickly explain how this session will work. My role is to guide the conversation, ensure that everyone has a chance to speak, and keep us on track. I'm here to listen and understand your perspectives—not to judge or influence you in any way. The purpose of today's focus group is to explore your experiences with social media, brands, and consumer behavior. I'm particularly interested in how these factors shape your sense of identity and how trends and values play a role in your choices. I want you to feel comfortable sharing your thoughts. There are no right or wrong answers here—I'm simply interested in your honest opinions and personal experiences. Before we dive in, here are a few important ground rules: Respect: Let's make sure we respect each other's opinions. Everyone should have the opportunity to speak without being interrupted. Confidentiality: Everything we discuss here will remain anonymous. The session is being recorded for analysis purposes only, and your names or personal details will not be mentioned in my thesis. Active participation: Please feel free to speak up, even if your opinion differs from others. I value diverse perspectives, and different viewpoints can make our discussion even more insightful. Before we jump into our first topic, let's start with a quick round of introductions. I'll go first: My name is Melina, I'm 26 years old I'm currently writing my master thesis at Catolcia Lisbon – that's why we are here today. In my free time I enjoy going out with my friends, to the gym or some yoga and pilates classes and I love travelling and meeting new people.

Appendix 6: Transcript FG 1

Introduction of participants in Appendix 1

M:

I'm really excited to have you all here today. Let's start with a simple question—what's the social media platform you use the most, and why?

A5:

I use TikTok and Instagram the most, spending about 2 to 3 hours per day on these platforms. I use them primarily because most of my friends are active on them, and I enjoy the content they offer. Additionally, they provide me with a good way to relax and unwind from my daily routine.

A6:

Instagram is my main platform too. For the longest time, I resisted joining because I thought I didn't really need it. But eventually, FOMO kicked in—I kept hearing about things my friends were talking about or seeing plans being made there, and I felt like I was missing out. So, about three years ago, I finally gave in and created an account. Now, pretty much everyone I know is on Instagram, so it's become a daily habit for me to check in and stay connected.

A3:

Same here—Instagram and TikTok. I've been using both platforms for a while now, but Instagram has been my go-to for about three years. I mainly use it to keep up with stories from my friends and see what's happening in their lives. TikTok, on the other hand, is my source of inspiration and entertainment. I love how I can discover new fashion trends, lifestyle tips, and creative ideas there—it's like an endless stream of interesting content that keeps me engaged.

A1:

I use Instagram and LinkedIn. If you count LinkedIn as social media, then that's definitely one of my main platforms as well. Instagram is more for fun, keeping up with friends, and entertainment, while LinkedIn is strictly for professional updates, networking, and staying informed about industry trends.

A4:

I use multiple platforms—TikTok, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Instagram. TikTok is entertaining, Instagram keeps me connected with friends, Pinterest is great for inspiration whether it's recipes, interior design, or outfits, and Snapchat is just for keeping in touch with close friends.

A2:

I'm mostly on Instagram because it's where all my friends and acquaintances are, and it's the easiest way to stay updated on what's going on in their lives. I spend around two hours a day scrolling through posts, checking stories, and occasionally interacting with content. It's become a habit at this point—whether it's catching up with friends or just browsing through things that interest me.

M:

Alright, now let's talk about purchases. Have you ever bought something because you saw it on Instagram or TikTok?

A4:

Yes, but not in an impulsive way. I saw an ad for a brand on Instagram, and at first, I just thought, Oh, that looks interesting. But I didn't buy it right away. Then, when some of my friends mentioned that they had already purchased from that brand and were happy with it, I started considering it more seriously. In the end, their recommendations convinced me to go for it. So, in my case, Instagram was more of an introduction, but my decision was really reinforced by word-of-mouth.

A5:

That sounds very familiar! I've definitely bought things after seeing them on social media. Honestly, the algorithm knows me too well—it always shows me products that match my taste perfectly, so I get tempted pretty easily. But the downside? I've regretted quite a few of those purchases because the quality didn't live up to expectations. Something might look amazing in a video, but when it arrives, it's a whole different story.

A1:

Yeah, I can relate to that. I've also bought something just because it looked really cool online. At the time, I was convinced it was a great idea, but when I actually had it, I realized it was kind of unnecessary. I think social media makes things seem way more exciting than they actually are.

A3:

Oh, I totally know that feeling! I bought a lipstick once because an influencer made it seem like an absolute must-have—perfect color, perfect texture, just the best thing ever. And then? I barely used it. It ended up sitting in my drawer because, in reality, it wasn't that special. Definitely one of those impulse buys I regret.

A2:

I had a similar experience, but with clothes. I remember seeing a couple of T-shirts on Instagram, and they looked perfect—great fit, cool design, just what I wanted. So, I ordered them, expecting them to look just like in the pictures. But when they arrived? The fit was completely off, and they didn't look anything like I imagined. I was sodisappointed. Since then, I've been way more skeptical about buying clothes I see on social media.

A6:

Nope, that's never happened to me. I rarely even look at Instagram ads, let alone click on them. I feel like most of them are just overhyped marketing, and I don't want to waste money on things I don't actually need. If I buy something, it's usually after doing a ton of research first.

M:

Interesting! Have you ever felt like your lifestyle or possessions weren't enough after seeing what others post on social media?

A3:

Yes, definitely. Sometimes, when I see pictures of these perfectly decorated homes, expensive furniture, or luxury vacations, I catch myself comparing what I have to what's being shown online. It's not necessarily that I feel bad about my own life, but there are moments when I think, Wow, my space looks so boring in comparison. It creates this subtle pressure—like I should be aiming for more, even if I was perfectly happy before seeing that post.

A5:

Yeah, I totally get that. I mean, you could be completely content with what you have, but once you see something that looks better or more expensive, you start questioning things you weren't even thinking about before.

A4:

I get that! But for me, it's mostly about fashion. When I scroll through Instagram and see all these influencers and stylish people in perfectly coordinated outfits, I don't feel like I'm missing out, but it does make me think, Hmm, maybe I should switch things up a bit. It's not a feeling of envy, more like inspiration mixed with a little bit of pressure. I do try to remind myself that most of these people receive their clothes for free or have way bigger shopping budgets than the average person.

A6:

That's actually one of my biggest issues with Instagram. You're constantly bombarded with these perfectly curated images of success, wealth, beauty—like everyone is living this flawless, aesthetic life. I'm older now, so I can see through it and remind myself that a lot of it is staged, filtered, or even sponsored. But if I were younger, I think it would have affected me much more. I can totally see how social media makes people feel like they're not doing enough or don't have enough, even when their lives are actually pretty great.

A2:

Yeah, I mean, I try not to let it get to me, but I see what you mean. Especially with younger people—I can imagine how hard it must be to separate what's real from what's just marketing.

A5:

I see what you mean, but honestly, I haven't really felt that way. I'm well aware that I already own a lot—probably much more than the average person. And I also know how much of what's on Instagram is exaggerated or curated to look better than reality I can clearly differentiate between what's real and what's just for show. In my opinion, the whole influencer world just promotes unhealthy and unrealistic consumption habits. People don't see what's behind the scenes—how many of those luxury items are gifted, rented, or only used for content. So, I don't let it make me feel like I'm missing anything.

A1:

Yeah, that's a good point. A lot of the stuff people show off isn't even really theirs. It's all just for engagement.

A2:

I wouldn't say I feel like I'm missing something, but sometimes, when I see a really nice car on Instagram, I do wonder what it would be like to own one. Like, I see these influencers casually driving their dream cars, and for a second, I think, That would be nice. But then reality kicks in, and I remind myself there are probably way more important things to spend money on. So, I guess it triggers a little curiosity, but not to the point where I feel bad about what I already have.

A3:

Oh my god, yes! The car thing is so relatable. I see those videos where someone casually steps out of a Porsche or a G-Wagon, and for a split second, I'm like, Okay, maybe I need to step up my game. But then I remember I don't even care about cars that much.

A1:

But for me not really, I don't let social media influence how I feel about what I own. I mean, sure, I see cool things online, but I don't sit there and think, Oh, I need to have this too. I know that a lot of what people post is curated to look better than reality. Plus, I focus on what makes sense for me rather than comparing myself to others.

A6:

Exactly. I think at some point, you just have to remind yourself that it's all a highlight reel. No one posts their bad days, their financial struggles, or their boring moments. It's all just the best, most polished version of their life. And when you start seeing it that way, it loses its power over you.

M:

That's a really interesting perspective, and I love how you all have different ways of dealing with it! Now, let's shift to peer influence. Have you ever bought something just because you saw that everyone else on social media had it?

A3:

Yes! A hair serum. It was everywhere on TikTok—every influencer was raving about it, and at some point, I just thought, Okay, fine, I'll try it. Honestly, I'm not even sure if it really works or if I just convinced myself it does because of the hype.

A5:

I can relate to that so much! I remember buying hoodies from WRSTBHVR and boots from Copenhagen Studios just because I saw them all over Instagram. It wasn't even that I needed them—I just kept seeing them again and again until I convinced myself they were essentials. The funny thing is, I still love them, but looking back, I probably wouldn't have bought them if they hadn't been trending so hard.

A2:

I probably have too, but nothing specific comes to mind. Maybe I just block out those moments so I don't have to admit I got influenced.

A4:

Not just because of social media, but it definitely played a role. When I needed new gym clothes, I ended up choosing a brand that a lot of influencers were promoting. The thing is, I wouldn't have picked that brand just because it was trending, but since some of my friends had already tried it and said it was actually good, that helped convince me. So in the end, it wasn't just social media—it was also word-of-mouth.

A1:

Not that I can remember. Maybe I'm just immune to these trends, or maybe I just don't notice when I fall for them.

A6:

Actually, if something is all over social media, it makes me less likely to buy it. You know those Stanley Cups? Everyone had them, and that actually turned me off completely. If something is too hyped, I start questioning whether people actually like it or if they're just buying it because everyone else is. That kind of overexposure makes me skeptical rather than interested.

A5:

That's actually so true. Sometimes, when I see something too much, I start thinking, Okay, this is probably just marketing.

M:

So you're saying if something is *too* popular, you avoid it on purpose?

A6:

Pretty much. If I see something all over Instagram or TikTok, my first instinct is to ask, Do I actually want this, or am I just being manipulated into thinking I need it? And most of the time, I realize I don't need it at all.

M:

That's an interesting perspective! It sounds like some of you get drawn in by trends, while others get turned off by them.

M:

Now, do you ever buy impulsively just because an influencer recommended something? How do you feel about the influence that social media and influencers have on your purchasing decisions?

A3:

Not anymore. I used to, but then I realized that influencers promote things just for money, not because they actually love the products. I've fallen for it before, but now I'm way more skeptical.

A4:

Same! I might get inspired by an influencer, but I wouldn't buy something just because they say it's good. I don't trust ads like that. If I see a product and it interests me, I might look into it myself, but their word alone isn't enough for me.

A5:

It depends—if it's a limited-time discount or something that seems like a great deal, I might buy impulsively. But for expensive products, I usually take my time to decide. I like to check multiple reviews before making a big purchase.

A6:

No way. I deliberately avoid lifestyle influencers and only follow private accounts or professionals in specific fields. I don't want my feed filled with ads disguised as recommendations.

A2:

No, I don't follow influencers at all. If I see something interesting, I do my own research first. I don't like the idea of being sold something just because someone got paid to promote it.

A1:

Nope, not really my thing. I prefer to buy things based on personal needs, not because someone online tells me I should.

M:

Let's talk about individuality versus conformity. On a scale from 1 to 10, how individual do you see yourself based on your lifestyle, clothing, and hobbies Please send me your answer on a scale from 1 to 10 via private chat and a short explanation, where 1 means blending in completely and 10 means being completely unique.

Results in Appendix 2

M:

That makes sense! But let's dive a bit deeper—do the brands or products you buy help you express your individuality, or do you think they just make you part of a larger trend?

A1:

Yes, as I mentioned before—I like looking sporty or casual but stylish. I try to dress in a way that reflects that while still maintaining good taste. It's not necessarily about standing out—I don't feel the need to be super unique—but I also don't want to look too plain or boring. I like when people see me and think, yeah, that fits him.

M:

So for you, it's more about feeling comfortable in your own style rather than using fashion as a statement?

A1:

Exactly. I want my style to be an extension of who I am, but I'm not chasing uniqueness just for the sake of it.

A3:

See, I don't think the brands I buy really set me apart from others. Most of them are from mainstream companies, and honestly, I like that. Trends influence me a lot, and I don't mind that my style isn't necessarily unique.

M:

Would you say you choose those brands because you genuinely like them, or because they're popular and socially accepted?

A3:

A little bit of both, I guess. I do like the way trendy things look, but I'd be lying if I said social influence doesn't play a role. When you see something everywhere, it starts to grow on you, you know?

A4:

Yeah, that's how I feel too. I think I can express myself through the things I buy and the way I dress, but I wouldn't say I'm particularly individual. Gestures slightly as she speaks Like, I still end up wearing the same brands and using the same products as a lot of girls my age. It's not that I don't have personal taste—it's just that my taste happens to align with what's popular. But sometimes, I do make more conscious brand choices.

M:

What do you mean by conscious brand choices?

A4:

Well, some brands really resonate with me, not just for their products but for their overall aesthetic and values. For example, I love the aesthetic and vibe of brands like Joseph Atelier and Norm, and I find their founders inspiring. Then there are brands like Armed Angels, where I really align with their values. So yeah, sometimes it's about more than just the look—it's also about what the brand stands for.

A5:

That's interesting because I feel the same way, but it really depends on the brand. Of course, I also wear affordable brands like Zara because their clothes fit my style and lifestyle best. However, I wouldn't say they reflect my individuality. I see it differently with high-end brands. I feel like I express my individuality more through them because not everyone can afford them, making them more unique.

M:

So for you, individuality can come from exclusivity?

A5:

Exactly. I think this is influenced by the way I grew up and the example set by my mother. Pauses for a moment Often, brands also give me a sense of self-worth, and to be honest, with most high-end brands, the quality is genuinely better.

A2:

I don't really see brands as a way to express individuality. For me, it's more about function and quality. If something looks good, great—but I'm not choosing a product to make a statement.

A6:

Yeah, same here. With the products I buy, I don't focus on standing out. I just try to make a rational purchase decision based on quality, reviews, and whether I actually need it. Pauses for a moment, then smirks If anything, I actively avoid things that are too hyped.

M:

That's interesting! So, if something becomes *too* popular, does that actually push you away from buying it?

A6:

Yeah, definitely. If I see something everywhere, I immediately start questioning if it's actually good or if people are just following the trend. The more overhyped something is, the less likely I am to buy it. But for me, it's even bigger than that—I would even say that I consciously try to shape my personality and individuality through things that are not material. I don't want my identity to be linked to brands or products at all.

A3:

Okay, but what if it's genuinely a great product?

A6:

Then I'll wait until the hype dies down and then maybe I'll consider it.

M:

Alright, so for some of you, brands are a tool for self-expression, while for others, they're just about function. And then there's A6, who avoids anything too mainstream and focuses on non-material ways to express individuality! I love these different perspectives.

M:

Have you ever bought something just because everyone around you had it?

A5:

Yes, I have—quite often, actually. But honestly, I don't have a problem with it. I usually buy things that I genuinely like, but if I see something on others that I really love, I tend to buy it too, even if it means I might look like everyone else. To be honest, I enjoy getting inspiration from others.

M:

So, would you say that for you, it's more about appreciation rather than conformity?

A5:

Exactly. But there are limits—I wouldn't buy something if I knew absolutely everyone was wearing it, especially if it's associated with people I don't like or don't want to be inspired by. That would feel a bit uncomfortable for me.

A4:

I totally get that! I wouldn't say I buy things just because everyone has them, but if a few people around me have something and I like it, I might get it too.

M:

Does that ever make you feel like you're blending in too much?

A4:

Yeah, a little bit. On one hand, it can make you feel like you're just like everyone else—which can be a bit boring. But on the other hand, it kind of feels nice, like you're part of a club or something. Laughs It's a weird mix of both!

A3:

Yes! I can't even remember exactly what it was, but I know I've done it before. Sometimes, something is just so popular that I feel like I need to have it too. It's like when you keep seeing the same thing over and over again, and suddenly you start liking it—even if you weren't that interested at first.

A2:

Yeah, same here. For example, traditional clothing—like Tracht. At first, I wasn't sure about it, but once I saw more people wearing it, I started liking it. And now, I actually feel good wearing it.

M:

That's interesting! So, in a way, seeing it more often made you appreciate it more?

A2:

Yeah, exactly. Sometimes, you need to see something on others before you realize it actually looks good or fits your style.

A1:

Not that I can remember. Maybe it's happened before, but nothing really sticks out.

A6:

No.

M:

Never? Not even once?

A6:

Nope. If I buy something, it's because I want it, not because everyone else has it. I don't see the point in getting something just because it's trending.

M:

So, it sounds like for some of you, trends and social influence play a role in your choices—whether it's about feeling part of a group or simply being inspired. But for others, like A6, trends don't seem to matter at all!

M:

Alright, everyone! Let's talk about brands and self-identity. What is your current favorite brand or shop, and why do you like it?

A5:

I would say Zara. They have a wide selection of clothes that match my style, and they are also very affordable. That's what I like most about them—you don't have to spend a lot to find stylish pieces that fit well into your wardrobe.

A4:

For me, it's Nom. Their pieces are timeless and aesthetic, with good quality and soft fabrics. I like that their designs work with everything, and I will wear them for a long time. They're not just a trend since they're so basic. That's what I value the most in a brand—something that doesn't go out of style too quickly and still feels high quality years later.

M:

That's interesting! Do you think that having timeless pieces makes you feel more connected to your personal style, rather than being influenced by trends?

A4:

Yes, definitely! When I buy from Nom, I know I'll still love the pieces years from now, instead of regretting them when trends change.

A6:

That depends—do you mean in terms of clothing and lifestyle? If so, I'd say Uniqlo. Their items are very basic, not flashy, and they have a good price-performance ratio, which is something I value a lot. I don't need anything extravagant, just good quality at a fair price. But if we're talking about something else, then I'd go with Thomann, which is the biggest online specialist retailer for musical instruments in Europe.

M:

That's a good distinction! What makes you pick Uniqlo for clothing?

A6:

It's simple, high-quality, and functional. They don't push fast fashion trends too much, which I appreciate. I prefer to have basics that last rather than constantly buying new things just because they're trendy.

A1:

For me, Zara is my go-to as well. It's casual but chic while still being affordable. I like that you can put together an outfit that looks good without spending too much. It makes it easy to follow trends without feeling like you're overpaying.

A3:

I'd say Zalando! Mostly because of the range of products and the fact that I can compare different options easily. That's what I love most—it's super convenient to shop there because you don't have to go to multiple stores to find what you need. I like having different brands in one place and the flexibility of returning things easily if they don't fit.

M:

That makes sense! So affordability, variety, timelessness, and quality seem to be the biggest factors for you all. It's really interesting how different people prioritize different things when it comes to brands!

M:

Can you share an example of a brand that reflects your personal values? What drew you to it?

A5:

A brand that reflects my personal values is COS. I appreciate their minimalist and timeless designs, as well as their focus on high-quality, sustainable materials. It aligns with my preference for durable pieces that feel unique and well-made. I like that their pieces don't go out of style quickly, and they make an effort to use better fabrics and production methods.

A4:

I don't have a perfect example, but in general, I appreciate brands that focus on sustainability and high-quality fabrics. If a brand puts effort into responsible production, I see that as a big plus.

A6:

For me, it's Thomann. They have great customer service, goodwill, fast delivery, and availability—it's a brand that feels familiar and trustworthy. I value reliability in a company, and they've never disappointed me when it comes to quality and support.

A1:

I'd say Gymshark and WRSTBHVR. They help me express a sporty and urban style, which fits my lifestyle. Gymshark, in particular, makes me feel motivated because their brand is all about fitness and progress.

A3:

I would say Pandora. Their designs are beautiful but not over the top. It's simple, good quality, and works for everyday wear. I like that their pieces feel personal—you can collect charms or choose jewelry that has meaning.

A2:

Hmm I would say, it's my sport club for me, based on my emotional connection. I was growing up with this sports club and they teaches me

M:

That's really interesting! Some of you connect with brands because of their values, like sustainability or trustworthiness, while others appreciate how they help express a personal style. It's great to see how different things matter to different people when choosing a brand!

M:

Have you ever chosen or avoided a brand because it helps you feel connected to a group?

A6:

I actually avoided iPhones for a while because I didn't want to have one just because everyone else did. I didn't like the idea of buying something just for the sake of fitting in. Now, I don't use an iPhone for different reasons—it's just too expensive, and I don't really value high-end smartphones that much.

A5:

Omg, no way, A6! For me, it's the complete opposite. Sorry for what I'm going to say now! But when it comes to electronic devices, especially smartphones, I would never buy an Android phone because no one in my social circle uses one. There are always jokes about Android users, and honestly, I just prefer iOS.

M:

So for you, it's not just about the technology but also about what it represents in your social group?

A5:

Exactly! It's not that I think Android is bad or anything, but iPhones just feel more familiar, and I don't want to be the one person in the group chat with green messages!

A4:

I don't like brands like A2my Hilfiger or Ralph Lauren—except for their baseball caps. They feel kind of pretentious to me, even though I can't really say why. I just associate them with a certain type of people that I don't really identify with.

A1:

For me, it's the opposite—I actually got Autry sneakers because I wanted a pair of stylish and trendy shoes that a lot of people in my circle were wearing. It wasn't necessarily pressure, but I saw them on others, and they looked really cool, so I decided to get a pair too.

M:

Do you feel like wearing them makes you feel more connected to that group?

A1:

A little bit, yeah. It's not like I needed them to fit in, but it's nice when you wear something that others recognize and appreciate.

A3:

For me, it's about avoiding certain brands. For example, there's this healthy protein and snack brand called More—I just don't like their philosophy, and the founder seems a bit strange, so I don't want to be associated with the brand at all.

M:

So it's not just about the products themselves but also about the brand's image and leadership?

A3:

Exactly! If I don't agree with a company's values or the way they present themselves, I just don't want to support them, even if their products are good.

M:

That's really interesting! Some of you choose brands to feel more connected to a group, while others actively avoid certain brands to distance themselves from an image or ideology. It really shows how much branding influences not just what we buy, but also how we see ourselves in relation to others!

M:

How important is sustainability when you choose a brand? Can you share the last sustainable product you bought?

A5:

Sustainability is somewhat important to me, but it's not always the main deciding factor. I do appreciate when brands focus on high-quality

and durable materials because I prefer to invest in pieces that last longer. The last sustainable product I bought was a basic T-shirt from COS made from organic cotton, about two months ago.

A4:

I am willing to pay more when I know a brand is sustainable, but their pieces still have to be visually pleasing to me. Unfortunately, I often think sustainable brands don't look as elegant, so often I still go for brands whose main focus is not sustainability, but I do like when I know they produce more sustainably or under fair conditions in Europe, for example. Nom claims they do that, so that's a plus.

A6:

I don't attach great importance to the sustainability of the products I order. That would certainly change if they were everyday products where you can easily save on plastic, etc. But for a larger individual purchase, it's not particularly important to me whether the guitar came to Germany by sailing boat or container ship. I'm convinced that the majority of companies are just greenwashing and that sustainability is being used more and more as an alibi event to boost their image.

A1:

I don't really choose my clothes based on sustainability criteria.

A3:

It's not that important to me either. Sustainability is such a vague term—what does it even mean to buy something sustainable? Is it just about planting a tree after a purchase?

M:

If you were a brand, what values and qualities would you want people to associate with you?

A5:

If I were a brand, I'd want to be associated with authenticity, quality, and timeless style. I'd also value confidence and individuality while staying mindful and reflective in my choices. I think a brand should make people feel good about themselves without needing to follow every trend.

M:

So a mix of elegance, self-expression, and thoughtfulness?

A5:

Exactly! I'd want people to feel like they're investing in something meaningful rather than just another purchase.

A4:

For me, it would be similar—timeless, high quality, sustainable, and authentic. I like brands that don't try too hard to be trendy but instead focus on longevity.

M:

Would sustainability be the most important aspect for your brand, or would it just be part of the bigger picture?

A4:

I think it would be a key part, but not the only thing. Quality is just as important—something can be sustainable, but if it doesn't last, what's the point?

A6:

For me, it would be all about good value for money, friendly customer service, and a reward for loyalty. I like brands that appreciate their customers and don't just focus on making a sale.

M:

So, more of a practical and customer-focused approach?

A6:

Yeah, definitely. I think people should feel valued when they support a brand.

A1:

I'd want to be associated with a mix of chic, sporty, casual, and urban. I like brands that have a relaxed yet stylish feel—something that works for everyday life but still looks good.

M:

So, a brand that keeps up with trends but still feels effortless?

A1:

Exactly! Something that fits into different lifestyles without being too extreme in one direction.

A3:

I'd also go for something qualitative, with a good price-performance ratio—fashionable but not too mainstream. Maybe even a little innovative, something that surprises people but still feels practical.

A2:

Quality, timeless and sizing for everyone, because I struggle sometimes a lot with finding the right size because 'm so tall.

M:

That's really interesting! Some of you focus on quality and longevity, while others think more about how a brand interacts with its customers. It's fascinating to see how different values shape what we'd want in a brand! Let's dive into our last discussion topic: short-term versus long-term identity goals. How important is it for you to be one of the first to try new trends or products?

A5:

It's not really important to me because, as I mentioned before, I'm not someone who sets trends. I prefer to get inspired by others rather than trying to stand out as a trendsetter.

A6:

Not important at all! I actually prefer to wait until there have been some early adopters who can provide reliable reviews. I don't see the point in rushing to buy something that might turn out to be disappointing.

A4:

Same here! I don't need to be one of the first to try something—especially if I'm unsure about it. But if someone I personally know and trust recommends it, I'm much more likely to try it.

A1:

For me, it's also not important. I need to feel comfortable with my style first before jumping on trends.

A3:

I mostly agree—I don't have to be a trend pioneer. But sometimes, it's fun to be ahead of the curve, especially with fashion and beauty products. When it comes to technology or bigger purchases, though, I tend to wait and see how things develop before making a decision.

A2:

I honestly couldn't care less. Trends don't interest me. If something works for me, I stick with it.

M:

Interesting perspectives! Do the products or brands you buy reflect your long-term values and goals? Would you like to make more long-term-oriented decisions?

A5:

Kind of, but to be honest, not really. I wish I could say my purchases reflect my long-term goals, but since I'm a student, I can't always afford brands that truly align with those values. In the future, once I have more financial stability, I definitely want to make more long-term-oriented decisions.

A4:

Yes! I try to buy very basic and timeless pieces most of the time so that I don't have to buy tons of things and can reduce my consumption.

A6:

No, not really. A lot of companies claim to sell products that align with long-term values, but in reality, most of them are just using that as a marketing strategy. That's why I prefer to make purchase decisions based on practical needs rather than aligning them with some idealized identity.

A1:

I'd say kind of, yes. I try to be conscious of my choices and incorporate long-term thinking, but I still make short-term decisions sometimes.

A3:

For me, it depends. With fashion and beauty, I'm more trend-driven, but when it comes to things like education or major life decisions, I try to think long-term. I'd like to apply that mindset more consistently across different areas of my life.

A2:

Not always, but I try. Sometimes you just need something quickly, and long-term planning isn't always an option. But for bigger investments, I definitely think ahead.

M:

Have you ever followed a trend and later felt it didn't suit you or match what's important to you?

A5:

Yes, I have. I followed the trend of buying Yeezys because they were so popular, and everyone seemed to have them. At first, I thought they were cool and fashionable, but later, I realized they didn't really match my personal style, and I felt uncomfortable wearing them.

A4:

Oh, totally! For me, it wasn't a product but a lifestyle trend—the whole gym trend. I tried to go to the gym a lot, drink protein shakes, eat protein bars, and all that. But I didn't enjoy it at all. It wasn't fun for me, and I didn't even like the taste of those protein shakes and bars. I felt like I had to do it because everyone around me and social media were promoting it.

A3:

Yes, definitely! I used to buy Gucci products just because of the brand name. I didn't necessarily love them, but it felt like something I should own. Looking back, I wouldn't do that again.

A6:

I have had several purchases where I regretted them afterward, but they weren't necessarily trend-based. More often, I regretted buying something that I thought I needed but then realized was unnecessary.

A2:

Nope. As I said before, trends don't really mean much to me. I prefer to stick with things that I already know work for me.

A1:

Not really. I don't think I've ever regretted following a trend because I usually take my time before jumping on anything.

M:

When you have to choose between following a trend and sticking to your own style or values, how do you decide?

A4:

I usually stick to my own style and values, but there are always exceptions. I often feel like when I see things repeatedly, I start liking them—even though at first, I didn't think they looked nice.

A5:

I try to find a good balance. I like staying up to date with trends, but I only follow them if they genuinely fit my style and make me feel comfortable. If a trend doesn't align with my personal values or doesn't suit me, I'd rather stick to what I know works for me.

A2:

Always my own way. Trends come and go, but what works for me has been tested and proven over time.

A1:

Same here. My own style and values guide my choices. If a trend aligns with them, great—but I won't follow something just for the sake of it.

A3:

It's a mix for me. I do follow trends, but I've started prioritizing better quality items over just getting the newest thing.

A6:

I always stick to my own values. Trends are fleeting, and I don't want to waste money on things that won't hold value for me in the long run.

M:

Looking back at the last few things you bought, do you feel they were trend-based or something that will still matter to you in a few years?

A5:

The last things I bought were sports clothes from Oysho. The quality isn't high enough for me to say I'll still have them in a few years. However, in terms of style, I would still wear them in a few years if they lasted that long.

A4:

I only bought basics in the last few months, so I feel they will accompany me for quite a while.

A1:

Mostly trend-based, but I needed most of the stuff—excluding some things I bought as souvenirs.

A3:

A mix. I recently bought a handbag, and I made sure it was timeless. I've started focusing on buying higher-quality items that won't feel outdated too quickly.

A2:

No, I think in a few years I will look back and be happy with my purchases because they were the right decision. They still work for me, and that's what matters.

A6:

Definitely something that will still be important in a few years. Last week, I bought myself a new guitar that I'd been wanting for over a year but had been saving up for. So, for me, this purchase was a long-term investment.

M:

Alright, we're coming to the final part of our discussion. Let's take a moment to reflect on everything we've talked about today. Looking back at your consumption choices, do you feel they are mostly influenced by your personal values, trends, or social expectations? And why?

A4:

For me, it's definitely a mix of all of them. I do care about looking nice and wearing stylish pieces, but if I'm being completely honest,

there's probably a part of me that still seeks approval from others. Seeing certain styles repeatedly on social media or in my circle definitely influences what I buy, even if I don't always realize it in the moment. It's not necessarily that I'm buying things just to fit in, but when something becomes really popular, I can't help but find it more appealing.

A6:

I get that. I try to keep my decisions as objective as possible. My purchases are more based on reviews and quality rather than trends or social pressure. I don't want to buy something just because an algorithm tells me it's the next big thing. But at the same time, I won't deny that when you see something over and over again, it kind of grows on you, even if you wouldn't have picked it initially. I try to stay aware of that and ask myself whether I really want something or if I've just been conditioned to like it.

A5:

Yeah, that makes sense. I would say that my consumption choices are a balance between trends and my own personal style. I love staying up to date with fashion, and I do get inspired by trends, but at the same time, I prioritize comfort and authenticity. I don't want to wear something just because it's trending—it has to feel right for me. I also think that even within trends, there's room to make things your own. Just because something is popular doesn't mean you have to follow it exactly the way everyone else does.

M:

That's an interesting perspective! So, for you, it's about finding that middle ground between keeping up with trends but still making sure they align with your personal taste?

A5:

Exactly! I don't want to feel like I'm just another person wearing the same thing as everyone else, but at the same time, I genuinely enjoy fashion and experimenting with new styles.

A3:

I totally relate to that, but I think my mindset has shifted over time. A few years ago, I was much more influenced by trends—I would see something all over Instagram and feel like I had to have it. But now, I prioritize my personal values more. I've started to really consider whether something fits my long-term style rather than just buying something because everyone else has it. That's not to say that trends don't play a role anymore, but I'm much more selective about what I follow.

M:

Do you think that shift happened naturally, or was there something specific that made you rethink your approach to shopping?

A3:

I think it was a combination of things. Seeing how quickly trends change made me realize that a lot of the stuff I bought didn't actually last or make me happy in the long run. I also became more interested in sustainability, so I started questioning whether constantly buying new things was really necessary.

A2:

I'm probably the least trend-driven here. I don't really pay much attention to what's "in" or "out" at any given time. If something works for me, I'll stick with it, whether it's trendy or not. That said, I do take recommendations from people I trust—if someone tells me about a product that's really great, I might try it out, but it's more about whether it fits my lifestyle rather than whether it's popular.

M:

So, in a way, you're influenced by social recommendations rather than trends themselves?

A2:

Yeah, exactly. I don't buy things just to fit in, but if I hear from multiple people that something is genuinely good, I might give it a shot. At the same time, I won't deny that sometimes you just don't want to miss out on something good.

M:

That's really interesting! It seems like most of you have a mix of influences—some of you lean more toward personal values, while others are more drawn to trends or social expectations, whether consciously or unconsciously. But what stands out is that all of you seem to think critically about your choices rather than just following trends blindly. It's been great hearing your different perspectives! We've had a great discussion about trends, individuality, and how we make purchasing decisions. To wrap things up, if you could give one piece of advice to someone struggling with impulsive buying or feeling pressured by trends, what would it be?

A3:

I'd tell them: You don't need everything that's trending! No impulse purchases. If you see something you like, put it in your cart, wait a few days, and then see if you still want it. That's been helping me a lot lately. It's so easy to get caught up in the excitement of new things, but if you give yourself time to think, you might realize you don't actually need it.

A1:

Yeah, I agree—only buy things you feel comfortable with and that actually make sense for you. Trends come and go, but in the end, you're the one wearing and using those things. It's important to make sure they reflect your personal style rather than just what's popular in the moment.

A5:

I'd say: Find a balance. It's totally fine to get inspired by others, but don't feel pressured to follow every single trend just to fit in. Sometimes it's better to invest in high-quality pieces that make you feel confident, even if they aren't the most popular at the moment. In the long run, those will probably serve you better than things that go out of style in a few months.

A6:

Exactly! My advice would be: Don't chase after every trend. Sometimes it's actually nice to go against the current and just do your own thing. If you like something, great—but don't let trends dictate what you should like.

A2:

I'd just tell them: Think before you buy. Don't just grab something because it's trendy or because you see it everywhere. Do your research, read about the product, and make sure it's actually worth it. Half the time, things that seem exciting in the moment end up forgotten at the back of your closet.

M:

That's great advice from all of you! It really seems like the key takeaway is to be more intentional with purchases—whether that means waiting before buying, focusing on personal comfort, or simply not feeling the need to follow every trend. It's been amazing hearing all of your perspectives today!

M:

Is there something we did not cover today that you would like to add?

A2:

No, I think we covered pretty much everything.

A6:

Same here, I feel like we touched on all the key points.

A5:

Nope, I think we reflected quite a bit on our consumption habits. Stay basic, I would say (laughs).

Appendix 7: Transcript FG 2

Introduction of participants in Appendix 1

M:

We're going to dive into how digital platforms shape our buying habits, influence our decisions, and create a sense of consumption pressure. Let's start with a simple question:

Which social media platform do you use the most, and why?

B5:

For me, it's definitely Instagram. I used to be on TikTok a lot, but I realized it was just consuming too much of my time, and I didn't feel like I was gaining anything useful from it. Instagram feels a bit more manageable—I can scroll through, share memes with my friends, and stay updated without getting completely lost in an endless stream of content. Plus, it's where my friends are, so it makes sense to stick with it. I'd say I check Instagram multiple times a day, sometimes just for a few minutes, but if I get caught up in reels, it can easily turn into a longer session.

B6:

Same here! Instagram is my go-to platform. I use it not just for entertainment but also for fashion inspiration. I follow a lot of sneaker blogs and streetwear influencers, so it's where I stay updated on the latest drops I check it multiple times a day. I've also noticed that I tend to check Instagram right after waking up and before going to bed—it's become a habit at this point.

B1:

I also use Instagram the most, but I wouldn't say there's a specific reason why. It's just always been my main platform. Unlike some of you, I never even created a TikTok or Facebook account. It's funny, though—I probably spend way too much time on Instagram without even realizing it.

B5:

That's crazy, half an hour is not much, it's almost nothing! I wish I would only spend 30 min a day at Instagram.

B4:

I mainly use Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, and occasionally Instagram. Snapchat is a great way to communicate with my closest friends or stay up-to-date with them without direct contact while still getting a glimpse into their daily lives. I use Snapchat, TikTok, and WhatsApp very often, with WhatsApp being the most frequent. It is my primary communication channel when talking to friends and sometimes even colleagues. I currently use Instagram less often. I find Instagram to be more "toxic" than other platforms because it often leads to comparing oneself with "friends" or rather acquaintances, which is not good for mental health. It makes you think too much about others and their lives or what they show on Instagram. A lot of it is also super fake. TikTok is a great way to pass the time and often provides useful tips for everyday life. However, the "addiction factor" is very high.

B3:

I use multiple social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Pinterest, and BeReal. However, the ones I engage with the most are Instagram and TikTok, as I find them the most entertainin. Instagram allows me to stay updated on what my friends are doing, while TikTok is my go-to for entertainment, trending content, and even useful tips for everyday life. On average, I spend about two to three hours per day on social media, but this can vary depending on the day. Sometimes I lose track of time while scrolling through TikTok. Instagram is a mix of entertainment and staying connected, and I often find myself checking stories, posts, and reels throughout the day.

B2:

For me, TikTok is the one I spend the most time on, even though I know it's a total time-waster. I can scroll for what feels like five minutes, and suddenly, an hour is gone. But Instagram is still important to me, mostly for keeping up with people and seeing what's happening in my city. I'd say I spend about two hours on TikTok and around 20–30 minutes on Instagram daily.

M:

Alright, let's talk about shopping. Have you ever bought something because you saw it on Instagram or TikTok? Can you remember what it was and how you ended up liking it?

B5:

Yes! I bought jewelry because I kept getting ads for it. At first, I wasn't even looking for jewelry, but the more I saw it, the more I thought, "Okay, maybe I need this." Instagram is really good at showing you things you might like. And honestly? I felt great about it because I love consumerism! There's something satisfying about discovering a product, buying it, and then receiving it—it feels like a mini dopamine rush.

B3:

Oh yeah, that has happened to me too. Especially with beauty products! I once bought a skincare product because it was all over Instagram and TikTok. It looked like the perfect solution, but afterward, I regretted it because it didn't really work for me. I was just influenced by the hype.

B1:

I think I only fell for it once. I bought a second-hand sweatshirt that was advertised on Instagram. It looked great in the pictures, but later, I decided I wouldn't make any more purchases like that—it was too expensive for what it was.

B6:

This happens to me a lot, especially with sneakers. If I see a limited-edition drop repeatedly in my feed, I start feeling like I need to buy it before it's gone. It's that FOMO effect, you know? I wouldn't say I regret most of my purchases, though, because I genuinely like what I buy.

B4:

That's so true! The fear of missing out makes you feel like you have to act fast. I've definitely bought things impulsively because they seemed exclusive. I have bought something through ads on TikTok and Instagram a few times. Mostly fashion items, like handbags, sweaters, or similar things. I have actually purchased things more often after seeing them from other users or influencers rather than directly through ads—much more frequently than purchases made through advertisements. I usually find it helpful that in videos, you can see right away how the items look when worn and how they can be styled. I didn't have any particular feeling about it. If I was satisfied with the product, then I had a good feeling.

B2:

I honestly don't think I've ever bought something just because I saw it on social media. Or at least I can't remember. But now that I think about it, I did once buy an energy drink that a new influencer was hyping up. I wasn't sure if I actually wanted it, or if I was just curious because it kept showing up on my feed.

M:

Now, let's talk about comparison. Have you ever felt like your lifestyle or possessions weren't enough after seeing what others post on social media?

B4:

Oh, absolutely! Especially when I see people constantly posting about their amazing trips and experiences. It can quickly make you feel like your own life is boring in comparison, even though I know that's not really the case. People tend to present an exaggerated version of reality

on social media. I don't necessarily feel pressured when it comes to material things, but I do find myself longing for the experiences others seem to have—traveling, friendships, exciting events—things that in that specific moment, I might not have.

B1:

I totally get that. I don't really feel this way when it comes to material possessions, but lifestyle? Absolutely. Travel content especially gets to me—I see people hopping from one exotic destination to another, living what seems like a dream life. It does make me jealous sometimes, but at the same time, it motivates me. I think seeing that kind of content pushes me to plan more trips myself, to make sure I'm experiencing life fully. So, I guess it's a mix of frustration and inspiration.

B3:

Yes, this happens to me a lot—even if I don't want it to. I wouldn't say it's always a conscious comparison, but it sneaks in. I notice it most with fashion and travel. Sometimes, I see an outfit that looks amazing on someone and feel like my wardrobe is suddenly outdated. And with vacations, it's the same—I might be perfectly happy at home, but then I see people lying on a beach or skiing in the Alps, and suddenly I feel like I need to be somewhere exciting too. And don't even get me started on beauty standards! Instagram is full of people looking flawless, and it's hard not to feel like you need to keep up with that, even when you know those pictures are filtered and staged.

M:

That's really interesting, B3. It sounds like a lot of the pressure comes from seeing highly curated, idealized images. Do you think knowing that it's staged helps you resist that pressure, or does it still get to you?

B3:

I wish I could say it doesn't affect me at all, but sometimes it does. Even when I know logically that these people use filters, good lighting, and probably took 100 photos to get that one perfect shot, it still creates a certain standard in my mind. Like, I know it's not real—but it still makes me think: "Maybe I should try harder."

B5:

Honestly? No, I don't really feel that way. I know social media isn't an accurate representation of real life, and I don't let it affect how I see my own lifestyle. If someone has something nice, good for them—it doesn't make me feel like I need to have it too.

B6:

Hmm, I think I fall somewhere in between. I wouldn't say I constantly compare myself, but there have been moments where I've felt like I was missing out. Especially in the fashion world—when you see influencers wearing the latest designer pieces or hyping up limited-edition sneakers, it's hard not to feel like you need them too. I wouldn't say it makes me feel bad about myself, but it does create a bit of pressure. Like, if I see a pair of sneakers that everyone is wearing and I don't have them, I start thinking, "Should I get them too?" It's not always FOMO in the classic sense, but more like a subtle push toward keeping up.

B2:

I think everyone compares themselves to others, even if they don't admit it. And sometimes, it's not even about material things—it's about success. For example, there's this entrepreneur I follow, Hoos. He's super successful, and he's achieved so much in his life already. Even though I don't know him personally, seeing his content makes me reflect on what I've done so far, and I catch myself wondering if I should be achieving more. It's not like I feel bad about myself, but it does make me evaluate where I am compared to where I could be.

M:

That's an interesting take, B2! It sounds like comparison isn't always about material things, but also about personal progress and success. Do you think that kind of comparison is motivating or does it create unnecessary pressure?

B2:

I think it depends on how you handle it. If you let it make you feel inadequate, then it's probably a bad thing. But if you use it as motivation—to push yourself, set goals, and improve—then it can be positive. It's a fine line.

B6:

Yeah, I agree. Sometimes, seeing people who are super successful makes me feel like I need to do more, but in a good way. Other times, it can feel like no matter what I do, I'll never be on their level, which is frustrating. I guess it just depends on my mood that day!

M:

Let's talk about the influence of social media trends. Have you ever bought something just because you saw that everyone else had it on Instagram or TikTok?

B1:

No, I really try not to follow any kind of trend on social media. Honestly, I feel like the algorithm creates this illusion that everyone has certain things, but in reality, it's just showing you content from a specific group of people. If you interact with sneakerheads, suddenly it feels like the whole world is obsessed with sneakers. If you follow fitness influencers, it seems like everyone is drinking the same protein shakes. But that's not actually true—it's just a bubble.

B2:

Yeah, I feel the same way. I can't really remember ever buying something just because it was all over social media. Sure, I notice trends, but they don't really push me into buying anything. If I do buy something, it's because I actually want it, not because everyone else has it.

B3:

Well... I can't say the same! I definitely have bought things just because I saw them everywhere. The best example? Sambas! Seriously, I feel like every single person on Instagram and TikTok had them at some point, and I eventually gave in. At first, I wasn't even that into them, but after seeing them over and over again, I started to think, "Okay, maybe I need a pair too." And now? I love them.

B4:

See, for me, it's the opposite. If I see something too much, I start losing interest. There have been things I wanted initially, but once I saw everyone and their dog wearing them, I was over it. It just makes the item feel less special to me. If something is super hyped, it kind of kills my excitement.

B5:

Nope. Never happened to me. I honestly don't care what's trending. I buy things if I like them, and that's it.

B6:

I get where B5 is coming from, but I have to admit—I've definitely been influenced by trends. As someone who follows fashion influencers, it's hard not to be. I'm really into streetwear, so when I see a certain pair of sneakers being hyped up and selling out everywhere, it makes me want them even more.

M:

That's a great point, B2! It seems like social media trends impact people in different ways—some feel pressured to buy quickly, others feel repelled when something is too popular, and some just see it as a confirmation that an item is worth getting. Now let's talk about impulse buying—specifically when it's influenced by social media influencers. Have you ever found yourself impulsively buying something just because an influencer recommended it?

B1:

Honestly, no. I actually don't even follow influencers—except for a few soccer players, but that's more about keeping up with their careers rather than caring about their brand collaborations. I just don't really see the point in taking product recommendations from people who are obviously getting paid to promote something.

B2:

Exactly! That's my issue with influencer advertising. It just feels so staged and scripted—I can never tell if they actually like the product or if they're just pretending because they got paid. I mean, how often do you see them using the same brand a month later? Probably never. That's why I don't trust it.

B3:

I get that! I used to be way more susceptible to influencer recommendations—especially when they made it super easy to buy, like with direct links to the product. It's so tempting when you see something that looks good, and with one tap, it's in your cart. I've definitely made a few impulse purchases that way. But now, I've become more cautious. I try to wait a few days before deciding if I actually need it or if I just got caught up in the moment.

B4:

For me, it depends. If a product promises to solve a specific problem I have, then yes, I might be influenced to buy it on impulse. Like, when I was struggling with skin issues, I kept seeing influencers promoting all these different skincare products that supposedly work wonders. I definitely bought some of them without thinking twice, just hoping they'd help. But when it comes to regular products that don't address a problem I personally have, I don't really feel the urge to buy them right away.

B5:

Nope, not at all. I don't even follow influencers, so I'm not really exposed to their recommendations. I prefer to make buying decisions based on my own research rather than being influenced by some random person online.

B6:

I wouldn't say I blindly follow influencers, but I can't deny that they have some influence on me. Since I'm really into fashion and sneakers, I follow a lot of streetwear influencers who always post about the latest drops. If I see something getting a lot of hype, I might get caught up in the excitement and buy it impulsively—especially if it's a limited release. I guess it's more about not wanting to miss out rather than just trusting the influencer.

M:

So, it sounds like some of you are very aware of these marketing tactics, while others still feel that influencers shape their buying behavior—especially when it comes to fashion, trends, and exclusive products. Let's explore something interesting—do you think you would buy fewer things if you didn't use social media?

B3:

Absolutely! Social media constantly exposes me to new products that I probably wouldn't even know about otherwise. If I weren't on Instagram or TikTok, I wouldn't see all these ads, influencer recommendations, or trendy items that suddenly feel like a "must-have." I'm pretty sure I'd buy way less because I simply wouldn't be aware of so many things.

B4:

I completely agree. The algorithm is way too smart—it knows exactly what I like and keeps showing me products that fit my taste perfectly. Sometimes, I see something and think, "Wow, this is exactly what I needed," but then I realize... I didn't even know this product existed five minutes ago! Without social media, I wouldn't be tempted as often, and I'd probably question my purchases more.

B5:

For me, it's a yes and no situation. Yes, I do see more ads and product recommendations on social media than anywhere else, and that definitely affects what I buy. But at the same time, I don't consider myself a big impulse shopper—I still think through most of my purchases. So even though social media increases exposure, I wouldn't say it completely controls my spending.

B2:

Honestly, I don't think my buying habits would change much. I mainly use social media for entertainment and to pass time. I don't really use it to shop, and I rarely feel the need to buy things just because I see them online. So for me, social media doesn't influence my spending that much.

B1:

Same here. I wouldn't say I buy less or more because of social media. I just don't feel that urge to shop impulsively when I see ads or recommendations. If I need something, I'll look for it, but I don't get tempted just because something keeps popping up in my feed.

B6:

I think social media does affect my spending, but maybe not in an obvious way. It's not always about seeing an ad and buying something instantly—sometimes, it just plants a subtle idea in your head. Like, if I keep seeing people using a certain tech gadget, home accessory, or even a new fitness trend, it makes me think, "Maybe I should get that too." Without social media, I probably wouldn't be influenced by these small, consistent reminders that make me want things over time.

M:

That's a great point, B6! So, for some of you, social media directly leads to purchases because of its targeted ads and influencer culture, while for others, it's more of a gradual influence—shaping your interests and preferences over time rather than leading to instant purchases. Overall, do you think digital platforms shape your buying habits? Would you say this influence is positive, negative, or both? Why?

B3:

Oh, for sure! But whether it's a good or bad thing depends on how you look at it. On the negative side, social media creates constant comparison—you see what others have, and suddenly you feel like you need it too. But on the positive side, it's a huge source of inspiration. I get so many great ideas for fashion, home decor, and even fitness routines that I probably wouldn't have come across otherwise. So I'd say it's a double-edged sword—helpful, but also a bit dangerous if you're not aware of how much it influences you.

B4:

I totally agree. The algorithm is scary good at figuring out what I like and showing me products I'm actually interested in. In some ways, this is super convenient—I don't have to scroll through endless websites or wander through stores for hours. But at the same time, it fuels overconsumption because it makes me want things I don't really need. Like, if I hadn't seen that ad, I wouldn't have even thought about buying it. So overall, I think it's both positive and negative, but if I had to choose, I'd lean more towards negative just because it encourages excessive shopping.

B5:

Yeah, for me, I'd say the influence is mostly negative. You get bombarded with ads and product placements on social media way more than anywhere else. Even if you're not looking for something, brands are constantly trying to sell you things. And let's be real—seeing those ads over and over again works. It's designed to make you buy more, and I definitely catch myself spending on things I probably wouldn't have without social media.

B1:

I see it differently. I don't think digital platforms really influence my materialistic habits that much—I don't feel like I buy more stuff just because I see it online. But where it does have an impact is in my activities. I've definitely been inspired to try new things, like a sport, a restaurant, or even a travel destination, just because I saw someone post about it. And I'd say that's a good thing—it's less about mindless consumption and more about experiencing new things.

B2:

Honestly, I don't think social media affects my purchasing habits very much at all. I don't get that many ads, or maybe I just don't notice

them the way other people do. I feel like social media is more of an entertainment platform for me rather than a shopping tool. So in my case, the impact is pretty minimal.

B6:

I think it definitely shapes how I shop, but I wouldn't say it's entirely bad. Like, yes, social media makes you want things—there's no denying that. But at the same time, it keeps you updated on trends, new releases, and exclusive drops. For me, it's not just about the ads, but also seeing what people in my network are buying. If I see certain products getting a lot of hype, I'll definitely check them out. So, I'd say the influence is strong, but I wouldn't call it negative—more like a necessary part of how we shop today.

M:

Let's talk about individuality versus conformity. On a scale from 1 to 10, how individual do you see yourself based on your lifestyle, clothing, and hobbies Please send me your answer on a scale from 1 to 10 via private chat and a short explanation, where 1 means blending in completely and 10 means being completely unique.

Results in Appendix 2

M:

Do you think the brands or products you buy help you express your individuality, or do they make you blend in with others?

B2:

I wouldn't say that the brands I buy really express my individuality. I mean, I buy what I like, but I know that a lot of people wear the same brands, so it's not exactly a statement. At the same time, though, I do think that brands can make you feel like you belong to a certain group. Like, for example, I got a PlayStation because everyone in my friend group had one, not necessarily because I had a deep connection to the brand. The biggest example for me, though, was the iPhone. I refused to get one for a long time, but eventually, since everyone around me had one, I gave in.

B1:

I'd say yes, but not in an obvious way. I don't go shopping with the thought, I need to express my individuality. I just buy what I like, and if that makes me stand out, so be it.

B3:

No, I wouldn't say so. I shop in places where a lot of people shop, and I mostly buy basics. It's not really about individuality for me.

B4:

That's actually a tricky question. I don't think the brands themselves make you unique, but I do think how you wear them matters. It's not about the label—it's more about the way you style something that makes it feel personal.

B5:

No, that's not something I really care about.

B6:

For me, fashion is definitely a form of self-expression. I wouldn't say I buy things just to be different, but I do like having pieces that feel unique, even if they're from well-known brands. Sometimes, it's more about how you put an outfit together than the brand itself.

M:

Have you ever completely disliked a product at first but then changed your mind after seeing it more often on other people? Maybe you even ended up buying it?

B1:

Oh yeah, absolutely! Shoes are a big one for me. There are so many styles I initially found weird or even ugly, but after seeing them enough times, especially in real life and not just on social media, I started warming up to them. It's funny how that works. Sometimes, you just need to see how people actually style them.

B2:

Same here! Baggy jeans are a perfect example. The first time I saw them, I thought, Why would anyone wear these? They looked oversized and kind of messy to me. But then, I kept seeing them everywhere—on Instagram, on people walking past me on the street, even some of my friends started wearing them. At some point, I thought, Okay, maybe they don't look that bad. I tried on a pair, and now? I basically live in them.

B3:

Oh my God, same! Wide-leg pants, cowboy boots, those thick headbands—at first, I thought they were all a bit too much. Especially cowboy boots! I remember thinking they looked so out of place unless you were actually riding a horse. But then I kept seeing them in all these cool outfits, and suddenly, I wanted a pair too. Now, I wear them all the time.

B4:

Yeah, trends definitely grow on you! Sometimes, I see something for the first time and immediately think, No way, that's not for me. But then, when I keep seeing it on different people and in different styles, I start thinking, Maybe I judged it too soon. It's weird how that happens.

B5:

For me, it was Birkenstocks. I really didn't like how they looked at first—I thought they were kind of clunky and, I don't know, just not stylish. But then, I started seeing more and more people wearing them, and eventually, I gave in and bought a pair. I still don't love the way they look, but I can't deny that they're super comfortable, especially in summer.

B6:

For me, it was oversized blazers. At first, I thought they were way too formal and made people look like they were wearing their dad's suit jacket. But after seeing them styled in different ways—especially in more casual streetwear outfits—I started changing my mind. Now, I actually love them. They add a cool, effortless vibe to an outfit.

M:

When you're unsure about what to buy, do you rely on what's popular or trending?

B3:

Yeah, I definitely do! I love getting inspiration from trends, especially when it comes to cosmetics and styling.

B2:

Not really. I just buy what I like, and if it happens to be trendy, then cool, but I don't go out of my way to follow trends. B4: I think trends influence all of us, whether we admit it or not. Even if you don't actively follow them, they shape what you see and what you end up liking over time.

B5:

I don't actively follow trends, but I do see ads on Instagram, and if I see something cool my friends are wearing, I might consider it.

B1:

No, I actually try to avoid buying things just because they're trending. In my opinion, that makes people less unique.

B6:

I wouldn't say I rely on trends, but I definitely pay attention to them. Sometimes I like them, sometimes I don't—it's more about taking inspiration rather than blindly following them.

M:

We all have certain brands we prefer—whether it's because of their quality, style, or values. So tell me, what is your current favorite brand or shop, and what is it that you like most about it?

B3:

For me, it's Oysho. Their aesthetic is timeless, the quality is great, and they offer good value for money. I feel like their pieces are designed to last, and that's something I really appreciate—I don't want to buy things that go out of fashion in a year.

B5:

I'd probably say Zara or Bershka. I like them because they have simple, high-quality basics, especially plain t-shirts that don't have big, flashy logos. I just want good fabrics and a clean look.

B2:

I'd go with Nike and Peso. Nike is just classic streetwear—you can't go wrong with it. But with Peso, it's also about the story behind the brand. I used to watch the founder's Minecraft videos back in the day, and now he's built a successful fashion label that's worn by some of the biggest rappers in the world. That's inspiring to me.

B4:

I don't have a specific favorite—it really depends on the collection and what I'm looking for at the time. I like to browse through different stores and online shops. But one thing is always important to me: quality over branding. I don't like brands that scream, "Look at me! I'm expensive!" That's just not my thing.

B1:

I buy most of my clothes second-hand on platforms like Depop or from vintage stores when I'm traveling. I don't feel the need to shop at mainstream brands all the time. That said, when it comes to sportswear, I stick to Nike. And for electronics, I do go for well-known brands like Apple, simply because of their reliability.

B6:

For me, it's Arket and COS. Their minimalist, Scandinavian-inspired designs are exactly my style. I love clean, well-tailored pieces that you can mix and match effortlessly. It makes getting dressed so much easier when everything in your wardrobe works together.

M:

That brings us to the next point—can you share an example of a brand that reflects your personal values? What drew you to it?

B1:

I could only share my soccer club VfB Stuttgart where I spend lots of money on. The brand is regional, humble and still stands for success.

B4:

I can't name a specific brand, but I try to avoid fast fashion when possible and focus on pieces that last longer. I don't like brands that manufacture under bad working conditions, so I try to be mindful of that when I shop.

B5:

For me, it's any brand that offers good quality for a fair price—no unnecessary branding, just simple and reliable. But I can't think of a special brand.

B3:

Honestly, Apple. I'm a huge Apple fan—Apple's dedication to innovation, user-friendly design, and a seamless ecosystem makes it a brand I admire, as it consistently strives to enhance the user experience.

B6:

I'd say Uniqlo. Their clothes are simple, high-quality, and they focus on functionality over trends. Plus, their pricing is fair for the quality you get.

B2:

Nothing really came to mind, but after you mentioned VfB, it clicked for me that it's the same for me—I admire the values of my football club just as much! Passion, tradition, respect.

M:

Have you ever chosen or avoided a brand because it helps you feel connected to a group?

B2:

Yeah, when I was younger, I bought a lot of branded hoodies and sneakers just because. Back then, it was about looking like I fit in.

B3:

For a while, I also didn't want to buy anything from Teveo, which is a sportswear brand. Many people always laughed at those who bought it, implying that everyone who wears it doesn't actually do real sports but just wants to look good.

B4:

I actually avoid certain brands for that exact reason. I don't like the typical "snobby" brands that people wear just to show off how much money they have. It just feels fake to me.

B5:

Nope, never really thought about brands that way. I buy what I like.

B1:

Same here—I actively avoid brands that are connected to a specific status group. Whether it's luxury brands or streetwear brands that try too hard to be cool, I don't want to be associated with that.

B6:

I wouldn't say I avoid brands, but I do choose brands that align with the lifestyle I want to represent. That's why I go for minimalist brands—it's about subtle elegance rather than loud branding.

M:

Do you think the brands you choose say something about you or how you want others to see you? Do they reflect your personality, values, or even your social identity?

B2:

Absolutely! Clothes make people—whether we like it or not, what we wear plays a big role in how others perceive us. It's not just about the brand itself, but the overall image and vibe you create for yourself. I think everyone, to some degree, is aware of how their outfit influences the way they're seen. You can deliberately shape the way people view you by choosing specific styles, colors, and even brands. If I wear Nike and Peso, it reflects that I like streetwear culture and want to align with that aesthetic.

B4:

I think brands definitely influence perception, but I wouldn't say they define a person. They're just one piece of the puzzle—a part of someone's outward appearance, but not their actual personality. Still, people do associate certain character traits with specific brands. For example, if someone wears luxury brands all the time, others might assume they care a lot about status or exclusivity. But does that mean they're actually like that? Not necessarily.

B3:

Oh, for sure! I definitely think brands play a role in how people see you. I mean, let's be honest—a first impression matters, and what you wear is a huge part of that. If someone is dressed in a super polished, high-end outfit, you automatically assume they're successful or put-together. If they're wearing laid-back, vintage clothes, you might assume they're creative or alternative. So yes, I do think brands contribute to the way we present ourselves.

B5:

Hmm, I don't know... I don't really think brands say that much about a person. At the end of the day, it's just clothing—you wear what you like, and that's it. Some people read way too much into it, in my opinion. Just because someone wears a certain brand doesn't mean they have a specific personality or belong to a certain group.

B1:

I'd say it's not about the brand itself, but rather how you wear it. I don't care about logos or names, but I do think my style as a whole represents who I am. For example, the fact that I buy a lot of my clothes second-hand already says something about me—it shows I don't chase mainstream trends, and I prefer a more individual approach to fashion.

B6:

Yeah, I totally agree with B1:. It's more about the overall aesthetic than the logo on the label. Some people wear brands just for the status, while others use them as a way to express their personality. I try to build a wardrobe where everything works well together and reflects my personal style, rather than just focusing on the name behind it.

M:

How important is sustainability when you choose a brand?

B3:

I don't really focus on sustainability, but if something happens to be eco-friendly, then it's a nice bonus.

B4:

Sustainability is important to me in the sense that I prefer to buy high-quality materials that last longer, so ideally, I can buy less and consume less overall. However, I haven't explicitly paid attention to the origin of the products so far. I do try to avoid brands like Shein & Co., where it's obviously clear under what conditions the products are manufactured. Especially when it comes to winter clothing, I have consciously avoided buying sweaters and similar items with a high polyester content or other low-quality materials in the past few weeks.

B3:

Hearing that I have to agree! That a good point B4: mentioned. I also want to buy more longer lasting stuff!

B5:

Not important to me. I just buy what I like.

B1:

To be honest, I don't care if the materiality of a product is more sustainable, but I do buy the majority of my clothing on second-hand platforms (both online and physically). I also think that sustainability is often only used as a marketing term that helps to promote a certain product without being fully sustainable for the world. Most brands in the world can never guarantee the sustainability of their product (environmentally and socially) throughout their entire value chain - which is why I often perceive sustainability claims as a lie. I do always avoid brands and shops that are publicly known for excessive bad working conditions such as child labor.

B2:

I don't really pay attention to it. I can't even remember the last time I bought something because it was labeled as sustainable.

B6:

I try to be mindful of it—I'd rather invest in fewer, higher-quality pieces than constantly buy new stuff.

M:

If you were a brand, what values and qualities would you want people to associate with you?

B2:

For me, quality is key, but it has to be within a reasonable price range. I wouldn't want my brand to be overly expensive—just good value for what you get.

B4:

I'd want my brand to stand for high quality and durability, but also for fairness. That means fair and sustainable production, as well as pricing that makes sense—not overpriced exclusivity.

B3:

For me, it would be about good quality and individuality. I think brands should help people express themselves in their own way rather than just following trends.

B5:

I'd focus on quality and longevity. A good product should last, and it should be fairly made—both in terms of price and how it's produced.

B1:

It would depend on what kind of products I sell, but in general, I'd want my brand to be more than just a brand. It should be responsible, humble, but still very cool in how it's perceived.

B6:

I see my brand as a blend of innovation, exclusivity, and timeless style. It should stand out in a way that's subtle—not overly flashy, but something people recognize for its quality and uniqueness.

M:

People love being early adopters of trends, while others prefer to wait and see how something develops before committing. How important is it for you to be one of the first to try new trends or products?

B3:

Not really important to me. I actually like to sit back and observe before I decide to try something. I want to see how other people style or use a product before I make up my mind.

B4:

I agree! I do think it's cool when a trend isn't completely mainstream yet and I can wear something that not everyone has, but I don't necessarily have to be the first. If I see something new and I like it, I'll go for it—but I don't chase trends just to be ahead of the curve.

B2:

Yeah, I'm the same. I prefer to wait and see how a trend plays out before I decide if it's really for me. Sometimes things look cool at first, but after a while, you realize they don't actually fit your style.

B1:

Honestly, I couldn't care less. The only time I get excited about being early to something is when it comes to tech—like a new phone or some cool gadget. But I wouldn't consider that the same as following a fashion trend.

B5:

Not at all important for me. I don't feel the need to be among the first to try something. If I like it, I like it, but I don't chase trends.

B6:

I'd say I enjoy being early to certain fashion trends, especially in streetwear. It's cool to spot something before everyone else catches on. But I also don't want to buy something just for the hype—I need to actually like it.

M:

Do you think your shopping habits align with what's important to you in the long run? Would you like to make more long-term-oriented decisions?

B3:

It depends. I do try to be more conscious of what I buy, especially when it comes to quality, but I still fall into trend-based shopping sometimes. I'd like to make more long-term decisions.

B4:

Same here. I tell myself I want to focus more on sustainability and high-quality pieces, but it's tough when fast fashion is so accessible. I think I'm improving, though—I buy fewer but better pieces than I used to.

B2:

I don't think my purchases really reflect my long-term goals. When I look at what I bought a few years ago, a lot of it doesn't fit my taste anymore. I'd definitely like to think more long-term when shopping.

B1:

To be honest, brands and products don't play a big role in my long-term goals. But I do like the idea of making smarter, longer-lasting choices.

B5:

I don't really have long-term goals when it comes to shopping, so no.

B6:

I try to mix both. I enjoy trends, but I also want to build a wardrobe with staple pieces that I'll still love in a few years.

M:

That brings me to another question—have you ever followed a trend, only to later realize it didn't suit you at all? Maybe something you were excited about at first, but then looking back, you thought, "What was I thinking?"

B4:

Oh, absolutely! I've definitely bought into trends that I later regretted. A good example is when middle-parted hair became super trendy again. Everyone was doing it, and I thought, "Okay, I should give this a try." But as soon as I saw myself in the mirror, I knew it wasn't for me. It just didn't suit my face shape at all, and I went right back to my side part.

B3:

Oh, I can totally relate! I went through a phase where I bought everything in bright colors because it was the trend at the time. But honestly? That's just not me. I feel way more comfortable in neutrals, and now I wonder why I ever thought neon pink was a good idea.

B2:

I try to avoid that kind of thing, but I'm sure it's happened to me before. That's exactly why I'm way more careful with trends now. I used to just go with whatever was popular, but I've learned my lesson.

B1:

It hasn't happened to me in a long time, but back in school, I was definitely guilty of this. I remember seeing all my friends wearing a specific T-shirt—it was everywhere. And, of course, I had to have it too. But after a while, I realized I didn't even like it that much. It was just the pressure of seeing it constantly that made me think I needed it.

B6:

Yeah, I've had that exact experience—but with sneakers. I bought a pair that was super hyped at the time, and I thought they were the coolest thing ever. But a few months later, I looked at them and thought, "Why did I buy these?" They didn't even match most of my wardrobe. Now, I try to think more about what actually fits my style instead of just going for whatever is trending.

B5:

Honestly? Not that I remember. I guess I've never been someone who really gets caught up in trends like that. If I buy something, it's usually because I actually like it, not just because it's popular.

B3:

That's actually impressive, B5! I wish I had that mindset back when I was buying all those brightly colored clothes. I probably would have saved myself a lot of money and some embarrassing outfits.

B2:

Yeah, same here! I think we all have that one phase where we get swept up in trends and later realize they didn't really suit us. But I guess that's how you figure out your own style, right?

B4:

Exactly! I feel like it's part of growing into your own style—making a few questionable fashion choices along the way.

M:

Looking back at the last few things you bought—do you feel like they were influenced by trends, or are they purchases that will still matter to you in a few years?

B4:

It's a bit of both, to be honest. I've definitely made some conscious efforts to buy more timeless pieces that I know I'll still wear in a few years. But at the same time, I won't lie—I've given in to some trend-based purchases as well. I think the challenge is finding a balance. Ideally, I'd like to shift more towards longevity, but sometimes, trendy pieces just feel fun and exciting in the moment.

B3:

Oh, I completely agree! I try to be mindful about what I buy, but trends are tempting. Just recently, I bought a winter jacket that I know is a solid long-term investment—it's a classic cut, high quality, and will last me for years. But... I also picked up a few trendy accessories that I probably won't love as much in a year or two. I guess I justify those by telling myself they're small, fun additions rather than major purchases.

B2:

That's actually hard to say. Most of my recent purchases have been clothes, and right now, I really like them. I'd like to think I'll still feel the same in a few years, but fashion is unpredictable. Sometimes, you think something is a long-term staple, and then a couple of years later, you wonder what you were thinking.

B1:

I think my purchases will last because I usually go for things that aren't just trendy but also practical. That's kind of my rule—I won't buy something unless I can see myself actually using or wearing it regularly. I try to avoid impulse buys that only look good for one season.

B5:

For me, longevity isn't really a concern because I don't buy trend-based things to begin with. The last few things I bought were more on the practical side—like a desk lamp. That's definitely something that will still be relevant in a few years!

B6:

I'd say most of my purchases will hold up well over time. I try to mix trendy and timeless pieces so that my wardrobe doesn't feel outdated too quickly. Some trends do have lasting power, after all. A well-clothing piece, for example, might be trendy now but still work as a staple later. That's why I think it's all about finding a middle ground—choosing trend-based items wisely while making sure they still fit your long-term style.

B4:

Exactly! And I think as long as we're aware of what we're buying and why, there's nothing wrong with mixing trends with timeless pieces. It's all

M:

We're coming to the final part of our discussion. Looking back at your consumption choices, do you feel they are mostly influenced by your personal values, trends, or social expectations? Why?

B1:

Definitely by my personal values because that's the only thing that really matters to me. Also, the people around me give me a positive feeling about the way I handle it. I often get compliments on what I wear or own, which reinforces my choices and makes me feel good.

B2:

I'd say mostly my own values. Trends don't influence me much, and honestly, I don't really care what others think about my style or purchases.

B4:

For me, it's probably a mix of both. I do like following new trends if they appeal to me, and I've definitely bought trend-based items in the past. But recently, I've started buying things purely because I like them, without caring whether they are trendy or not.

B3:

Yeah, I'd say it's a mix too, but not to an extreme degree. A few years ago, I was way more trend-driven, but now I try to balance it out.

B5:

For me, it's mostly impulse buying. If I see something that looks good and I want it, I'll probably buy it. It's a mix of things I need and things I randomly come across.

B6:

I think for me, it's trends to some extent, but also my personal preferences. I like to keep up with what's current, but I also try to buy things that I'll actually wear for a long time, rather than just following a hype.

M:

If you had to give a friend from your generation heartfelt advice on consumption and identity, what would it be?

B4:

If I could give just one piece of advice, it would be: less is more—and I really mean that. Invest in fewer but higher-quality pieces that truly represent you, instead of constantly chasing new trends. It might seem tempting to buy cheap, trendy items, but in the long run, well-made things that align with your personal style will serve you so much better. Think about it: do you want a closet full of items that go out of fashion in a year, or a few pieces that make you feel great every time you wear them?

B3:

I completely agree with B4! But I'd add: be mindful before you buy something—do you truly need it, or is it just a passing impulse? It's so easy to get caught up in the excitement of shopping, but often, those impulsive buys don't bring real happiness. I've learned that saving up for something meaningful is so much more satisfying than constantly buying small, trendy things that I forget about after a few weeks. When you invest in something well-made, you not only respect your own hard-earned money, but you also contribute to a more sustainable approach to fashion and consumption.

B2:

My biggest advice? Stay true to yourself. Just because something is trending doesn't mean it's right for you. Everyone has their own unique style, and forcing yourself into a trend just because "everyone else is wearing it" can make you feel uncomfortable in the long run. Trust your gut—if you don't love something before it becomes a trend, you probably won't love it when the hype dies down either. Learn to recognize what genuinely suits you instead of trying to fit in with every new wave of fashion.

B5:

Honestly, if you really want to consume less, take a break from social media. I know it sounds simple, but it's one of the most effective things you can do. Social media constantly bombards us with ads, influencers, and people showing off their latest purchases. And let's be real—it's designed to make you want things you didn't even know existed ten minutes ago. If you step away from that noise, you'll be surprised how much less you feel the urge to buy things just for the sake of it.

B1:

I'd say: connect your purchases to your passions. If you're into music, invest in a great instrument rather than the latest fashion trend. If you love fitness, get quality workout gear that lasts, rather than fast fashion. Don't let consumption be something passive that you do just because you feel pressure from others. Make it intentional. At the same time, though, don't be afraid to admit that sometimes we are influenced by others—and that's okay. The key is knowing when something genuinely resonates with you versus when you're just following the crowd.

B6:

Before you buy something, ask yourself: "Do I truly love this, or am I just seeing it everywhere?" There's a huge difference between being inspired by trends and blindly following them. If you buy something just because everyone else has it, chances are, you won't care about it in a few months. But if you choose items that fit your personal style—regardless of whether they're trendy or not—you'll build a wardrobe (or even a lifestyle) that actually reflects who you are, not just what's popular at the moment.

M:

What was an unexpected learning from our discussion today?

B1:

I never really thought about the way I consume things before, and I'm actually kind of positively surprised by my own approach.

B2:

I think I realized that trends actually influence people way more than they admit—even those who say they don't follow trends still subconsciously get affected by them.

B5:

I learned that I am not individual at all. (laughs)

B3:

For me, it was interesting to hear how different our approaches are. Some of us are very trend-conscious, while others barely care about them at all.

B4:

Yeah, same here! I thought I was quite independent in my choices, but I can see now that trends definitely shape what I like and buy.

B6:

Honestly, I didn't expect us to have such different takes on consumption. I assumed most people were either completely trend-driven or completely against trends, but it turns out we're all somewhere in between.

Appendix 8: Transcript FG 3

Introduction of participants in Appendix 1

M:

Which social media platform do you use the most, and why? How often do you use these platforms?

C1:

I mostly use Instagram and TikTok, but I actually deleted TikTok recently because I realized it wasn't good for me. I found myself spending too much time on it, and it affected my mood. Snapchat—I still have it, but I don't use it much. Overall, I'd say I spend about two hours a day on social media.

C6:

That's interesting, **C1**. I actually avoid TikTok for that exact reason—I know I'd just get sucked into it. (laughs) For me, it's mainly Instagram. I check it multiple times a day, mostly to keep up with friends and see what's happening. I also use YouTube a lot, especially in the evenings.

C2:

Yeah, I totally get that, **C6**. Instagram is my main platform too, but I set a one-hour daily limit to keep it under control. I manage to stick to it most days—maybe 80% of the time. (laughs) I use it to stay in touch with people I don't see often, but I do get stuck on reels sometimes.

C3:

For me, it's definitely Instagram. Pretty much all my friends are on it, so it's the easiest way to stay connected. I don't really use TikTok because I feel like I'd spend way too much time there.

C4:

I use both Instagram and TikTok, but I'd say Instagram is my number one. I actually post stories and pictures there, while I use TikTok more for inspiration—fashion, food, and interior ideas. I also check LinkedIn three to four times a week to stay updated on business news and industry trends.

C5:

Since I work as a social media manager, I probably spend way more time on these platforms than the average person. (laughs) I use Instagram mostly for personal connections—watching stories, checking reels, and keeping up with my friends and family. TikTok, though, is like my personal Google. I use it for everything—fashion ideas, travel recommendations, even gardening tips!

C6:

Wait, really? TikTok instead of Google?

C5:

Yeah! If I need a product review or a quick hack, I'll check TikTok first before searching on Google. The results feel more personal and real, like recommendations from actual people instead of just ads or websites.

M:

Alright, now let's talk about purchases. Have you ever bought something because you saw it on Instagram or TikTok? What made you decide to buy it? How did you feel afterward?

C1:

Oh yeah, quite a few times—especially beauty products. You see them everywhere, and they always look so perfect in ads or influencer videos. The lighting, the smooth skin, the flawless makeup—it's hard not to be convinced. (laughs)

C6:

I get that! For me, it's more tech stuff. I've definitely bought gadgets that I didn't really need just because they looked cool in an Instagram ad. You know those videos where they show some "life-changing" product? Yeah... I've fallen for that a few times.

C2:

Same here! I kept seeing ads for this one product over and over again, and at some point, I was like, "Okay, fine, I'll buy it." (laughs) The power of repetition is real!

C3:

Definitely yes, especially on Instagram. The way the ads work—they make you feel like you need something, even though you were perfectly fine without it five minutes ago. And then, depending on the product, I either feel really good about my purchase or regret wasting my money.

C4:

For me, it's mostly been food-related. I've seen so many recipe videos that look amazing, and I've tried to recreate them... but let's just say, the reality doesn't always match the expectation. (laughs) Also, I've bought trendy clothes that I saw on Instagram, but sometimes they don't fit quite as well as they did in the pictures.

C5:

Oh, many times! Especially if an influencer I trust recommends it. I think when you see someone you like using a product, it feels more authentic than just a regular ad. Most of the time, I feel good about it—it's like a little reward for working hard.

M:

That's actually an interesting point. Do you guys think you trust influencers more than traditional ads?

C1:

For sure! It feels like they're giving you personal advice, even if it's obviously still marketing.

C2:

Yeah, but I think we also need to be careful because a lot of them just promote whatever pays well.

C4:

True. I try to stick to influencers who are really selective with their sponsorships—like, if they only promote things they actually use.

M:

Interesting! Have you ever felt like your lifestyle or possessions weren't enough after seeing what others post on social media? Can you share an example?

C1:

Oh, absolutely. It comes in phases, but there are times when I scroll through Instagram and suddenly feel like I don't have enough. Especially

with travel—I see influencers who seem to be on vacation all year long, and I start wondering, “Why am I not doing that?” It feels like everyone else has more, experiences more, and I start thinking I need those things too.

C6:

Yeah, I get that! For me, it’s not so much about travel, but more about career and achievements. I see people my age posting about their internships at big companies, side businesses, or investments, and I start feeling like I should be doing more or achieving more. Social media makes it look like everyone else has their life figured out, and I’m just here trying to finish my degree. (laughs)

C2:

That’s interesting, **C6**. I’ve definitely had moments like that too, but I try to remind myself that Instagram isn’t real life. A lot of the lives we see there look absolutely amazing, but they’re curated. I’m actually quite content with my own life and try not to compare myself too much.

C3:

I totally get what **C1** and **C6** are saying! It sometimes feels like the people we follow on Instagram don’t have any stress, responsibilities, or problems. They’re always in amazing places, at beautiful restaurants, wearing perfect outfits. And even though I know that’s not their full reality, it still gets to me sometimes.

C4:

I actually have a bit of a different perspective—I find it more inspiring than discouraging. When I see beautiful places, stylish outfits, or exciting events, I take it as motivation rather than feeling like I’m missing out. But I do understand how it can create pressure for some people.

C5:

For me, it’s definitely about lifestyle and money. Whenever I see people traveling all the time or living these super luxurious lives, I feel like I should be working harder to have the same lifestyle one day. I start thinking, “Am I doing enough? Am I earning enough? What if I’m missing out?” It can be really frustrating.

C6:

Yeah, that’s the tricky part, right? We logically know that social media only shows the highlights, but somehow, we still feel that pressure.

C1:

Exactly! And then I remind myself that influencers literally get paid to travel and post all these amazing pictures. But still, the feeling sneaks in!

M:

That’s a great discussion! Now, let’s shift to peer influence. Have you ever bought something just because you saw that everyone else on social media had it?

C1:

Oh, absolutely! The best example for me is the Dyson Airwrap. I saw so many “Get Ready With Me” videos on TikTok where people used it, and I just couldn’t resist. It looked like the ultimate hair tool, so I convinced myself I needed it. And honestly? It’s good, but definitely not as life-changing as TikTok made it seem. (laughs)

C6:

I can totally relate! I once bought a specific kind of workout gear because I kept seeing it all over Instagram. Everyone in the gym seemed to be wearing it, so I thought, “Okay, I guess I need this too.” Looking back, I probably wouldn’t have bought it if I hadn’t been exposed to it a hundred times online.

C2:

For me, it was those fancy aesthetic blankets—like the ones from Klekks or Arket. I kept seeing them in all these cozy home setup posts, and suddenly I thought, “Yeah, I definitely need one of those.” (laughs) Did it change my life? Not really. But it does look nice in my apartment!

C3:

Same here! I’ve definitely bought sportswear just because I saw it everywhere on Instagram. Some brands just dominate social media, and after a while, you start feeling like you can’t work out without their clothes.

C4:

For me, it was a bag! I saw it all over Instagram—everyone had it, and I felt like I needed it too. But honestly, once I had it, I wasn’t even that excited about it anymore. It was like... the hype was more fun than actually owning it.

C5:

Yes, definitely. The Adidas Spezial sneaker is a perfect example. I saw them everywhere, so I bought not just one but two pairs. And to be honest? They don’t even really excite me. I just felt like I had to have them because everyone else did.

C6:

That’s so true, **C4** and **C5**! It’s like the fun part is the chase, not actually having the item. Once you own it, it’s like... okay, now what?

M:

Now, do you ever buy impulsively just because an influencer recommended something? How do you feel about the influence that social media and influencers have on your purchasing decisions?

C1:

I don’t really use swipe-up links, but I do buy beauty products impulsively if I see them online. Especially if it’s a product that looks really good in a video—like a foundation that makes someone’s skin look flawless, or a mascara that seems to work like magic. I tell myself, “Okay, I’ll just try it,” and before I know it, I’ve ordered it. (laughs)

C6:

I think I’m the opposite—I don’t really do impulse buying when it comes to influencers. I might watch product reviews or see what’s trending, but I always take some time before making a decision. I like to check different sources first to see if something is actually worth it.

C2:

Same here! I don’t buy things impulsively. If I see something interesting, I’ll think about it, maybe check reviews or wait a few days. Most of the time, that waiting period is enough for me to realize I don’t really need it. (laughs)

C3:

Yeah, I think I’m quite careful, too. If an influencer recommends something, I don’t buy it immediately—I’ll go to the website, look at the details, maybe even check YouTube reviews. I try to be logical about it instead of just clicking “buy now.”

C4:

Exactly! I don’t fall for it so easily because I know a lot of influencer promotions are just acting. They’ll hype up a product for a paid ad, but that doesn’t mean they actually use it. I prefer getting recommendations from real people I trust.

C5:

Okay, I’ll admit it—I do buy things impulsively when influencers recommend them. (laughs) But only if it’s someone I trust and follow regularly! If I see a product over and over again, I start thinking, “Maybe I do need this in my life.” And honestly, sometimes it works out well, but other times I regret it.

M:

That’s interesting—do you feel like the repeated exposure is what convinces you, or is it more about who’s promoting it?

C5:

Both, I think! If I see something constantly, it definitely builds up this feeling of “everyone has it, so it must be good.” But I also trust certain influencers more than others. If they seem genuine and I know they don’t promote just anything, I’m way more likely to believe them.

M:

Do you think you would buy fewer things if you didn’t use social media?

C1:

Yes, absolutely! That’s actually one of the reasons why I deleted TikTok. It really started to annoy me how everything is being advertised—especially these micro-trends that come and go so fast. One day, a product is the must-have, and the next, no one cares about it anymore. It made me realize how much unnecessary stuff I was buying just because I saw it everywhere. And honestly, I also deleted it because I was just spending way too much time on social media in general.

C6:

That makes total sense. I think I would probably buy less, too. Social media constantly exposes us to new products—things we wouldn’t even think about if we weren’t seeing them all the time. Without that, I’d probably stick to buying things only when I really need them.

C2:

Yeah, same. I’m sure I would buy less if I wasn’t on Instagram. Even though I don’t make impulse purchases, I know social media still influences me in subtle ways. Seeing something repeatedly does make it more appealing, even if I don’t act on it immediately.

C3:

Definitely. I notice that even when I try to be mindful about my spending, I still get influenced. Social media makes you feel like you need things, and without that constant exposure, I’m sure I’d spend less money.

C4:

I’m not sure, honestly. I don’t think I buy that much because of social media. Maybe I get inspiration from it, but I don’t feel like it pushes me to buy unnecessary things. If I want something, I usually think about it first anyway, so I don’t think my habits would change that much.

C5:

Yes, 100%! I would definitely buy way less without social media. I can’t even count how many times I’ve bought something just because I saw it trending on Instagram or TikTok. I don’t even want to imagine how much money I would have saved if I wasn’t so easily influenced! (laughs)

M:

Overall, do you think digital platforms shape your buying habits? Would you say this influence is positive, negative, or both? Why?

C1:

I’d say definitely negative. I end up buying way too many things I don’t actually need—things I didn’t even know existed ten minutes before I saw them on social media. It’s like the algorithm knows exactly how to tempt me. (laughs)

C6:

That’s so true! Sometimes I’ll see a product that looks really cool, and suddenly I start convincing myself that I need it—even though I was totally fine without it before. But I think the influence is a mix of both. Social media does introduce me to things I might genuinely like, but it also pushes me toward stuff I don’t really need.

C2:

Yeah, I feel like social media definitely influences what I buy, but I don’t see it in a negative way. It gives me inspiration, which I actually enjoy. Whether it’s fashion, travel, or even just cool gadgets—I like discovering new things that I probably wouldn’t have found otherwise.

C3:

For me, it’s both positive and negative. On one hand, social media introduces me to new products, events, and places that I probably wouldn’t have come across otherwise. On the other hand, it can also make me feel like I need things I never considered before, which can sometimes lead to unnecessary spending.

C4:

I totally agree. Social media does influence what we buy, and the algorithm plays a big role in that. I’ve noticed that once I search for something, I suddenly start seeing only that kind of product. It’s like the platform decides what my price range or style is, and I just get bombarded with similar things. That can be really frustrating—especially for people who can’t afford certain things but constantly see them being promoted.

C5:

Absolutely! I’d say the influence is evenly split for me. In terms of fashion and home decor, I’d say it’s negative because I often feel the urge to keep up with trends. But when it comes to healthcare and personal well-being, social media has actually been really helpful. I’ve discovered remedies and solutions for health issues that I wouldn’t have known about otherwise—because other people shared their experiences. So in that sense, it has actually had a positive impact on me.

C2:

That’s interesting! I never really thought about the health aspect before, but you’re right—there’s a lot of useful content out there that can actually help people.

M:

That’s such a great point! It sounds like for most of you, social media is a double-edged sword—it influences your purchases, sometimes in a good way (by introducing helpful products or ideas), but also in a negative way (by creating unnecessary wants and reinforcing unrealistic expectations). It’s fascinating how something as simple as an algorithm can shape what we think we need!

M:

Let’s talk about individuality versus conformity. On a scale from 1 to 10, how individual do you see yourself based on your lifestyle, clothing, and hobbies Please send me your answer on a scale from 1 to 10 via private chat and a short explanation, where 1 means blending in completely and 10 means being completely unique.

Results in Appendix 2

M:

Do the brands or products you buy help you express your individuality or set you apart from others? If so, how?

C1:

No, not at all. I honestly don’t think I own a single thing that makes me feel unique or that sets me apart from others. Most of the things I buy are just normal, trendy items that lots of other people have. I don’t really go out of my way to find something “different.”

C6:

Yeah, I get that! I think for me, it’s not so much about being unique, but more about finding things that fit my personal taste. I wouldn’t say that what I wear makes me stand out, but it does represent my style and what I feel comfortable in.

C2:

Exactly! I wouldn’t say my clothes or the brands I buy make me look individual, but they do make me feel like I belong to a certain group. I think a lot of us choose brands that reflect something about us—whether it’s a lifestyle, a hobby, or a vibe we identify with.

C3:

I kind of agree. Sometimes I do feel like I've bought something that's a bit more unique or special, but it doesn't happen very often. Most of the time, I end up choosing things that are practical and that I know I'll actually wear or use. So I'd say partially, but mostly no.

C4:

That's such a tricky question! (laughs) I'd say yes—at least partially. I do think that clothing plays a role in how people perceive you, and in that sense, it does contribute to individuality. But at the same time, a lot of people end up wearing the same trends, so it's kind of a mix.

C5:

I'm honestly not sure. I feel like I dress very basic and buy really basic products, so I don't see myself as someone who stands out fashion-wise. I don't think the things I own make me feel particularly individual—I feel kind of neutral in terms of style.

M:

Have you ever bought something just because everyone around you had it? What was it and how did it make you feel?

C1:

Yes, definitely! When I see my friends using certain makeup products or accessories, I often end up buying the same thing. It's not even always a conscious decision—it just feels natural to want what everyone else is raving about.

C6:

Yeah, I get that. I think for me, it's been with certain clothing items. If I see a particular style getting super popular among my friends, I'll eventually give in and buy it, too. Not necessarily because I feel pressured, but because it just becomes the norm, and I don't want to feel like I'm missing out.

C2:

Same here! I'd say mostly with shoe trends. At first, I might not even like a certain sneaker or style, but after seeing it over and over again, I start thinking, "Okay, maybe I do like this after all." (laughs) But I wouldn't say it gives me any strong feelings—I just go with the flow.

C3:

Yeah, I agree! When I buy something that's trending, I actually kind of enjoy it because it makes me feel like I get the hype. It's nice to be able to talk about it with others and share the experience. It's almost like a collective trend that brings people together.

C4:

Exactly! Sometimes, it's not even about the product itself, but more about the feeling of being part of something. Like, if everyone around you has a certain bag or jacket, you start feeling like you should have it, too. I can't think of a super specific example, but I know I've definitely experienced that feeling.

C5:

Oh yeah, for me, it was definitely the Adidas Spezial sneakers. I saw them everywhere, and even though I wasn't totally in love with them, I still bought two pairs! (laughs) It just felt like something I had to have to keep up with trends.

C6:

That's so true! It's weird how sometimes we don't even love a product, but we still buy it because it's just the thing to have at that moment.

M:

Have you ever disliked a product at first but then changed your mind after seeing many people use or wear it? Can you share an example?

C1:

Oh, for sure! The Dyson Airwrap again—at first, I thought it was ridiculously overpriced, and I told myself I'd never spend that much on a hair tool. But after seeing so many people use it and rave about it, I kind of started thinking, "Hmm... maybe it is worth it?" (laughs) I bought it, but honestly, I wouldn't do it again. Also, Apple's over-ear headphones—I used to think they looked weird and bulky, but now I find them really stylish and actually kind of want a pair.

C6:

I can totally relate! For me, it was those chunky Balenciaga sneakers. When they first came out, I thought they were the ugliest shoes ever. But after seeing them everywhere, my brain somehow adjusted, and I started thinking, "Okay... maybe they're not that bad." I never ended up buying them, though. (laughs)

C2:

Oh yeah, the Stanley Cup! When I first saw it, I thought, "Why would anyone spend that much money on a water bottle?" (laughs) But then I got one as a gift, and I have to admit—it's actually pretty nice. It keeps drinks cold forever, and now I use it all the time.

C3:

Hmmm... I don't think that's ever really happened to me. If I dislike something at first, I usually stick to my opinion. I guess I'm just stubborn like that. (laughs)

C4:

Ohhh, so many times! A classic example is cowboy boots. I used to think they looked super outdated, but now? I love them! I saw so many people styling them in a cool way, and I eventually gave in and bought a pair. Now I wear them all the time.

C5:

Yes, same thing happened to me with Dr. Martens! I used to hate how they looked—too clunky, too heavy. But after seeing them styled in so many different ways, I started to warm up to them. And now? I own a pair and wear them all the time.

M:

When you're unsure about what to buy, do you find yourself relying on what's popular or trending? Why or why not? Where do you usually look for inspiration?

C1:

It really depends on the product. If it's something practical, like a household item or skincare, then I focus more on functionality rather than trends. But when it comes to fashion—especially shoes, jeans, or sweaters—I definitely pay attention to what's trending. If I see a certain style everywhere, it influences me a lot.

C6:

Yeah, I think I'm the same way. If I'm unsure about something, I'll check what's popular at the moment—not necessarily to follow the trend, but because I assume there's a reason why it's trending. If so many people like it, maybe it's actually good. But I wouldn't say I blindly follow trends. I like to mix them with my own style.

C2:

I wouldn't call myself an early adopter or a trendsetter—I'm more of an observer. (laughs) I watch trends, see what sticks around, and then decide if it's something I actually like. If I'm unsure about a purchase, I'll probably end up going with what I've seen frequently, just because it feels like a safer choice. For inspiration, I either look at people in stylish coffee shops or scroll through Instagram.

C3:

Yeah, I do pay attention to trends sometimes, but I always check in with my friends first. If I'm really undecided about something, I'll ask them for their opinions and see what they think before I buy it.

C4:

No, not at all. If I'm unsure about buying something, I take my time and think about whether I really need it and if I actually love it. I don't

like buying things just because they're trendy. My inspiration comes mostly from Pinterest, Instagram, or even directly from shopping websites—I like looking at different styling ideas before making a decision.

C5:

Oh, for sure! I think I just enjoy keeping up with trends and having new things. It's not necessarily about copying others, but more about feeling excited about something fresh. And sometimes, I like to think that maybe I inspire people around me with my choices, too. (laughs) I usually look for inspiration on TikTok or from the big influencers I follow on Instagram.

M:

That's interesting! So for you, trends are more about excitement rather than pressure?

C5:

Yeah, exactly! I don't feel like I have to follow trends, but I enjoy them. It's fun to experiment with new styles or products.

M:

Have you ever followed a trend even if it didn't match your usual style or values? Why did you do it?

C2:

Oh yeah, I once thought I needed a cool tracksuit because everyone was wearing them. I kept seeing people pull them off so effortlessly, so I bought one, thinking I'd look just as cool. Turns out, I never wore it once. (laughs) It just didn't feel like me at all.

C5:

That's exactly how I feel sometimes! I think there's this fear of looking outdated or "old-fashioned" if you don't follow trends. I know it's kind of silly, but I definitely feel pressure to keep up, even if a trend isn't totally my style.

C6:

Yeah, I get that! I actually gave in to the oversized baggy jeans trend. At first, I thought they looked ridiculous, but after seeing them everywhere, I convinced myself they were cool. I bought a pair, but honestly, they just didn't work for me.

C4:

That's funny, because for me, following trends has actually helped change my style in a good way. Sometimes I start wearing something just because it's trendy, but then I realize I actually like it. Cowboy boots were a great example—at first, I thought they were outdated, and now I wear them all the time.

C1:

Oh my god, I almost dyed my hair pink just because it was a huge trend! (laughs) I'm so grateful my mom didn't let me do it, because I definitely would have regretted it. Also, there was a phase where I bought all these graphic T-shirts that weren't really my style, just because I saw them everywhere.

C3:

I don't think I've ever followed a trend that completely clashed with my values, but when it comes to fashion, I love experimenting. Even if something isn't totally my style, I sometimes try it out just to see if I like it. Trends can actually be a fun way to discover new things!

M:

Alright, everyone! Let's talk about brands and self-identity. What is your current favorite brand or shop, and why do you like it? What characteristics or values do you like most about this brand?

C5:

I'd say H&M online, but not necessarily for H&M itself—it's because they also sell &Other Stories and Arket there. I feel like those brands offer slightly higher quality compared to other fast fashion brands. Plus, their pieces are a bit more unique; you don't end up wearing the exact same Zara jacket that everyone else has.

C6:

That's a good point! I think for me, Uniqlo is my favorite right now. The quality is good, the designs are super minimalistic, and the price is still reasonable. I also like that they don't change their collections too often, so I don't feel pressured to constantly buy new things to "keep up."

C2:

I'm with you on that! My go-to is Carhartt—it's high-quality, durable, and a lot of their pieces are timeless. I like investing in clothes that I know will last me years, rather than following short-lived trends.

C1:

For me, it really depends. For clothes, I love Gina Tricot or Zara, and for makeup, it's definitely Rare Beauty. I love Rare Beauty because the quality is really good, but it's still affordable. With Gina Tricot, I feel like they offer great basics at reasonable prices, and their clothes actually last.

C3:

I really like Villa Sophie Label and Lululemon. The fit and style of their clothes just work so well for me. I also feel like they design their pieces in a way that really flatters different body shapes, which I appreciate a lot.

C4:

Honestly, I've never really thought about what values a brand follows. (laughs) I don't buy based on that—I just look for clothes that fit me, that have a good price-to-quality ratio, and that I actually like. If I had to name one, I'd say H&M, but I don't really pay attention to brand values when I shop.

M:

Can you share an example of a brand that reflects your personal values? What drew you to it?

C1:

Hmm... I don't think so, or at least nothing comes to mind right now. I usually choose brands based on quality and style rather than their values.

C2:

For me, it's definitely Patagonia. They have strong social and ecological responsibility, and I like that they actually practice what they preach. Plus, their products are high-quality and long-lasting, so it's a win-win.

C6:

That's a great one, **C2!** I'd say Veja for me—simple design, good quality, and they focus on sustainability without being too flashy about it. They don't just talk about being eco-friendly; they actually build it into their entire supply chain.

C3:

I'd have to say Lululemon. Besides having great quality, I also feel like they put a lot of thought into their environmental impact and working conditions. I appreciate when a brand makes an effort to be more responsible.

C4:

I honestly can't think of a brand that I specifically support because of their values. I shop more based on fit, quality, and price, rather than what a brand stands for.

C5:

If I had to pick one, I'd say Caia Cosmetics. Their brand messaging is all about confidence, authenticity, and quality, and I love that. It's more than just makeup—it's about feeling amazing in your own skin.

M:

Have you ever chosen or avoided a brand because it helps you feel connected to a group?

C1:

I'd say the only brand I'm really loyal to is Apple—I would never use an Android phone. (laughs) Other than that, I try to avoid shopping at Shein because I don't want to support their business practices. I know fast fashion isn't great in general, but Shein is just on another level in terms of unethical production.

C2:

Yeah, I totally get that! For me, it's Fred Perry—not because of the brand itself, but because it became really popular among right-wing groups. I don't want to be associated with that, even if I like some of their designs.

C6:

That's actually an interesting point—I think branding and social perception play a huge role in why we avoid certain brands. I don't have a specific one that I boycott, but I do stay away from brands that feel too shady or exploitative.

C3:

I don't think there's any brand I actively avoid—at least none that I'm super aware of.

C4:

Same here. I don't really make conscious decisions to avoid brands. If I like something and the price and quality are good, I'll buy it.

C5:

Yeah, same for me—I don't actively boycott any brand.

M:

Do you think the brands you choose say something about who you are or how you want others to see you?

C1:

Oh, definitely! I've noticed that when I wear more expensive bags, people perceive me differently. The same happens when I use my Stanley Cup—it's like people automatically associate it with a certain lifestyle. People watch what others are wearing, and they judge based on that, even if it's unconscious. I also feel like there's a difference in how people treat me depending on whether I leave the house looking put-together or not.

C6:

That's interesting! I think brands do say something about us, but I don't believe they define who we are completely. Like, just because someone wears designer brands doesn't mean they're wealthy, and just because someone wears basic clothes doesn't mean they don't care about fashion. But I do think brands create perceptions, whether we want them to or not.

C2:

Yeah, I'd say probably yes, but I don't personally identify with a brand. I wear things that I like, not because I want them to make a statement about me. That being said, I do think people make assumptions based on brands—whether we like it or not.

C3:

For sure—at least partially. For example, when I wear Lululemon, people instantly assume I do a lot of yoga or work out regularly, even if I just like the fit and comfort of their clothes. So in that sense, yes, brands definitely shape how people see us.

C4:

Yeah, I think a little bit, but more in terms of financial perception. If someone wears only high-end brands, people assume they have a lot of money. On the other hand, if someone wears mostly budget-friendly fashion, others might assume they're more financially conscious. So brands definitely send some kind of message, even if es nicht bewusst ist.

C5:

Yes, maybe—but in a different way! I like wearing things that look minimal and basic, but that you don't see on everyone. It's not about flashy logos for me, but more about picking pieces that feel unique, even if they're simple.

M:

How important is sustainability when you make purchasing decisions? Do you actively try to buy from sustainable brands, or is it not a big factor for you?

C1:

Honestly? Not at all. I wish I cared more, and I think it would be cool if I were someone who really prioritized sustainability, but realistically, I know that I don't. I try to be more mindful in other ways, though—I never buy plastic bags when shopping, and I completely avoid plastic bottles.

C2:

For me, it's pretty important—I'd say 8/10. I try to buy things that are high-quality and long-lasting rather than fast fashion. For example, I invested in a Patagonia Gore-tex jacket with a lifelong guarantee because I know I'll have it for years instead of buying multiple cheaper ones. I try to buy from brands that are environmentally conscious—it makes me feel like I'm contributing to something good.

C3:

Same here! I do care about sustainability, but when it comes to fashion, I honestly still end up buying things just because I like them. However, I try to make up for it in other areas—for example, I'm much more eco-conscious when it comes to grocery shopping or reducing waste in my daily life.

C6:

That's actually a good balance, **C3!** I think I'm somewhere in between. I don't shop exclusively from sustainable brands, but if I have the option to choose a more sustainable alternative without sacrificing quality or style, I'll go for it.

C4:

For me, it's not relevant at all. I don't actively think about sustainability when I buy things—I just go for what fits me, looks good, and is within my budget.

C5:

Yeah, same—I wouldn't say sustainability is a huge factor for me. If something I like happens to be from a sustainable brand, that's great, but it's not something I specifically look for.

M:

If you were a brand, what values and qualities would you want people to associate with you?

C1:

High quality, fair price-performance ratio, excellent customer service, and timelessness. I love products that are durable and don't go out of style too quickly.

C2:

Social and ecological responsibility, high quality, and authenticity. I'd want my brand to be responsible, built to last, and something people can trust without question.

C3:

Quality, inspiration, effortlessness, and comfort. I'd want my brand to make people feel good and relaxed, like something that fits seamlessly into their lifestyle.

C4:

High quality at a fair price. No unnecessary hype or overpriced exclusivity—just well-made products that actually deliver on their promise.

C5:

Quality, trust, and passion. I love brands that feel genuine, where you can tell that the people behind them truly care about what they're creating.

C6:

Innovation, reliability, and understated luxury. I wouldn't want my brand to be flashy, but rather something that stands for quiet excellence—premium in a way that people appreciate for its substance, not just the name.

M:

How important is it for you to be one of the first to try new trends or products?

C1:

I usually don't jump on trends immediately. I need time to get used to them, and I always wonder if they'll disappear quickly. If I notice that a trend sticks around for a while, then I'll join in.

C6:

Same here! I don't feel the need to be the first to try something new. I like to observe first and see if a trend is actually worth it. If it's just hype, I'll pass, but if it proves to be long-lasting, I might get into it later.

C2:

It's not important to me at all. I usually wait until trends become really popular before I decide whether I want to try them or not.

C3:

Not important to me either. If I like something, I'll get it—whether it's trending or not.

C4:

Not important at all! (laughs) I prefer to wait and see how a trend develops. Once I see how people style it or how useful a product really is, I decide if I want to join in or just ignore it.

C5:

Yeah, I feel the same. I like to wait a bit longer and only buy something if I see that a lot of people are actually satisfied with it. I don't want to waste money on something that might turn out to be useless after a few weeks.

M:

Do the products or brands you buy reflect your long-term values and goals? Would you like to make more long-term-oriented decisions?

C1:

I'd say I try to buy things that align with my long-term goals, but of course, I still fall for trends sometimes. One thing I've really changed is how I buy beauty products—I now only get products that are actually good for my skin and really suit me. I also don't buy as much as I used to. But ideally, I'd like to be even more mindful in the future.

C6:

Yeah, I think I try to make long-term-oriented choices, especially when it comes to things like tech or clothing. I prefer to invest in higher-quality products that will last longer, rather than buying cheap things that I'll have to replace soon. But I'm definitely not perfect at it—sometimes, I still go for impulse buys. (laughs)

C2:

Same! Sometimes, I definitely make purchases with a long-term mindset, but I can't say every decision is that strategic. I'm trying to be more conscious, though—especially with clothing. I'm focusing on buying timeless pieces instead of following fast-moving trends.

C3:

I try to be mindful about it, but honestly, not always. Sometimes, I still buy from brands that don't fully align with my values—either because they're cheaper or because I just like the products. It would definitely be smart to think more long-term when making purchases, but es ist nicht immer einfach.

C4:

I've actually never thought about it that way. I usually just buy what I like in the moment, and that's what matters to me. There's always a risk that I'll stop liking something over time, so I don't put too much pressure on making "forever" purchases.

C5:

I'd say yes, I try to invest in higher-quality, more expensive products that last longer and look more premium. I definitely want to stick to that mindset and avoid buying things that I'll regret later.

M:

Have you ever followed a trend and later felt it didn't suit you or match what's important to you?

C1:

Yes! I used to buy so many trendy things that just weren't me. Now, I try to be more conscious, but I still fall for some of them.

C6:

Same! Looking back, I realize I've bought a lot of things just because they were trending, not because I actually liked them.

C2:

Yeah, I've had that moment where I thought, "Why did I buy this?" Sometimes, trends just make you feel like you *need* something, but when the hype dies down, you realize it wasn't really your style.

C3:

I don't think I've ever regretted a purchase completely, but I have bought things that I ended up wearing only once or twice.

C4:

For me, it's more about making sure that what I buy fits my personal style, even if it is trendy. I try to balance trends with long-term wardrobe staples.

C5:

Oh, I regret some trend-based purchases for sure! (laughs) Sometimes, I just get caught up in what's popular at the moment and don't think it through.

M:

Looking back at your consumption choices, do you feel they are mostly influenced by your personal values, trends, or social expectations? Why?

C1:

I'd say mostly social expectations. I like it when people notice my outfit and say, "Oh, she looks cute!" That definitely influences how I shop. Of course, trends and personal values play a role too, but at the end of the day, I want to be perceived a certain way.

C6:

That's super interesting, **C1!** I think for me, it's a mix of all three, but I try to keep personal values as my main guide. That being said, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't at least a little influenced by trends and social norms. If literally everyone around me is wearing something or using a certain product, I do start to consider it more.

C2:

Yeah, same! I think all three factors play a role, but at the core, I believe my personal values are still the most important. Like, I won't buy something just because it's trending if it doesn't fit my style or beliefs. But I can't deny that trends and what people around me wear do shape my choices sometimes.

C3:

I totally agree! I'd also say it's a mix of everything. I definitely get influenced by my environment, which can be both positive and negative. I like discovering new things through my friends or social media, but I also try to stay mindful of what actually aligns with my own taste.

C4:

For me, trends definitely play a role. I think most of us like to keep up with fashion cycles to some extent, even if we don't follow every single trend. But I also don't feel like I need to chase everything new—if I like a trend, I'll go with it, but if not, I'll just ignore it.

C5:

For me, it's definitely trends and social expectations. Like I mentioned before, I love wearing trendy clothes and shoes because it makes me feel more fashionable and up-to-date. I know some people like timeless pieces, but I really enjoy the excitement of new trends.

C1:

That's really interesting! **C5**, do you ever regret buying trendy things after the hype dies down?

C5:

Oh, for sure! (laughs) Some trends age really badly, and I look back and think, "Why did I buy this?" But at the time, it made me feel good, so I don't really see it as a waste.

C6:

That's a good way to look at it! I think for people who love trends, it's more about enjoying the moment rather than trying to make every purchase last forever.

C2:

Yeah, and I guess that's what makes shopping so personal. Some of us want things to last long, while others enjoy trying new styles and switching things up. Neither is right or wrong—it's just about what makes you happy.

M:

If you had to give a friend from your generation advice on consumption and identity, what would it be?

C1:

Don't jump on every single micro-trend from social media. It's just a waste of money, time, and effort for something that will only be "cool" for a short time. Stick to things that actually last and make sense for you.

C2:

Wear what makes you feel comfortable. Be open to new things, but never buy something just because others are doing it. And remember—trends are temporary, so don't spend too much money on super-trendy items. They'll likely be out of style in a year.

C6:

Yeah, I'd say focus on buying what actually fits your style and lifestyle. It's fine to experiment, but don't let trends control what you wear or own. If you invest in timeless pieces, you'll probably feel better about your purchases in the long run.

C3:

Exactly! Buy what you like and what makes you feel good, not what everyone else is buying. Your style should be about you, not just copying others.

C4:

You don't have to follow every trend. Before buying something, ask yourself if you really identify with the style and feel comfortable in it, or if you're just getting it because everyone else has it. If it's the second one, it's probably not worth it.

C5:

Try to skip some trends and only follow the ones that truly suit you. Not every trend is worth your money—especially when you already know it's only going to last for a few months. Instead, try to find sustainable trends that have longer-lasting appeal, so your purchases make more sense in the long run.

M:

What was an unexpected learning from our discussion today?

C1:

I already knew I had a bit of a shopping problem, but it's really interesting to see that other people feel the same way. Sometimes you think you're the only one struggling with certain habits, but apparently, that's not the case! I should definitely try to get my consumption under control a bit more.

C6:

That's a really good point! I think this discussion made me realize just how much we are all influenced by social media and others around us, even when we don't consciously notice it. I'd like to be more aware of my decisions and make sure they're actually my own, not just based on external influences.

C2:

I hadn't really thought about it before, but I've just realized that Instagram is basically my main source of inspiration when it comes to what I buy. It's kind of scary how much content influences my choices without me even realizing it.

C3:

For me, it was eye-opening to see that I actually care about sustainability, but when it comes to fashion, I don't really act on it. I tend to prioritize looks over sustainability, and that's something I should be more conscious about in the future.

C4:

I never really thought about why I buy from certain stores or brands. This discussion made me realize that maybe I should pay more attention to the values a brand represents, rather than just picking things based on price and style.

C5:

I've realized that I really need to become more individual in my shopping choices. This discussion made me see that I just follow trends and do what everyone else is doing—without really thinking about whether I actually like it for myself. That's definitely something I want to change.

M:

That's really interesting! It seems like all of you had some great insights—whether it's realizing how influenced we are by social media, noticing contradictions between values and actions, or wanting to make more intentional choices. It's great to see how reflecting on our habits can help us become more aware consumers.