

**Gen Z Fashion on TikTok:
Navigating Identity Perceptions and Revisiting
Simmel's Paradoxical Fashion Theory**

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A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Communication Studies (MCS)

2025

School of Communication Studies

Abstract

Social media applications such as TikTok have created a new context for how fashion through content is engaged with and consumed, which in turn impacts and has a significant role on its users. Barnard (1996) argued that fashion is a form of communication, with meaning being embedded within a broader sociocultural environment. With this, there is opportunity to extend this notion within the updated online context of TikTok, analysing how users of TikTok platform create meaning either by consuming or uploading fashion content. This study also analyses the application's role and impact on its user's fashion decision-making choices and even their own perceptions of their identity.

Additionally, this study explores the relevance of Simmel's (1957) dualistic paradigm, considering the ongoing tension inherent between individuality and collectivism within the context of TikTok. To address these two research problems, the study utilised a qualitative research approach that was interpretive and phenomenological in nature. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with highly fashion-conscious TikTok users within the Generation Z demographic, considered typical users of the application. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was employed, revealing different tensions surrounding the role and function of influence, critical perspectives on the algorithm and the complexities of identity representation on the app.

In turn, the study found that users simultaneously criticised and found selective merit in terms of being influenced by fashion content on TikTok, showcasing high levels of discernment and weariness of the commercial or consumer-driven functions of TikTok. Meaning is revealed as participants critically monitor the fashion decision making of other people, which in turn influences their own fashion choices. The findings reveal that users are highly discerning, valuing authenticity from the content they observe and its creators. In line with Simmel's dualistic theory, participants valued individuality in contrast to following trends, with the behaviours described by participants potentially intensifying the tension between individuality and collectivism. This study contributes new insights on the usage behaviours, critical thinking processes and how Generation Z users discern influence. Furthermore, the importance of authenticity within content and fashion are highlighted, extending

understanding of social media that can be insightful to the wider community of people invested in fashion. Additionally, this study is beneficial for like-minded fashion-conscious users within the cohort, as the findings can further advance understanding of their world and what is important.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



Signature: _____

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Date: _____

14 November 2025

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to each of my six research participants. Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to talk about the world of fashion today alongside your personal experiences with the topic with such ease and passion, your generosity is immensely appreciated.

This thesis could not have been possible without my supervisor Dr. Rufus McEwan. I am extremely grateful for all your excellent guidance, wisdom and support, alongside always encouraging me to push forward and to never doubt myself.

To my beautiful mother Liliya, I cannot fathom where to even begin. Words cannot express my gratitude towards everything you do for me, alongside your endless positivity and motivation. Everything I do is for you. To my father Todor, thank you for always getting me to laugh throughout the entire process and never failing to bring a smile to my face. I hope I was able to make you proud.

To my two Dianas. Baba Diana, I could not have undertaken this journey without all your support. From calling once a day to being there at my doorstep, you inspire me to always do my best and strive for more. To my sister Diana, you already know how much I appreciate you, you're my star!

To my brilliant partner Daniel, thank you for always being my support system and always right there by my side. Your endless amount of love, patience through all the highs and lows, daily words of motivation and ability to make me giggle is more than I could ever ask for.

To all my wonderful friends, I thank you all endlessly for your words of encouragement and moments of fun throughout it all! To Meoghan, my university sister. Sharing this journey with you has meant everything to me. From our constant laughs, study sessions and many moments together drinking a variety of caffeinated iced beverages, our friendship holds a special place in my heart. To Samrita, I can't believe it, but after everything we did it! To all my wonderful family back home in Bulgaria, I thank you all for the long-distance phone calls and your many words of encouragement, I hope I was able to make every single one of you proud.

Ethics Approval

This study attained ethical approval by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 07 October 2024, reference number 24/301.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

'Office Siren', 'cottagecore' and 'coquette ballet flats'. These words may not be significant to most people, but for members of the Generation Z demographic interested in fashion, they represent common dress items or aesthetics that one may come across whilst using the TikTok application. Defined by Singh and Dangmei (2016), the demographic of Generation Z "were born in the 1990's and raised in the 2000s during the most profound changes in the century who exist in a world with web, internet, smart phones laptops, freely available networks and digital media" (p. 2). In terms of the cohort's social media usage, TikTok is widely considered to be Generation Z's domain, being adopted as a prominent form of community building, entertainment, information, consumption and above all else, communication (Lee et al., 2022; Stahl & Literat, 2022; Zhang, 2021).

1.1.1 Introducing TikTok

The social media application TikTok was originally established in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance as a platform for creating videos in which users lip-synced other forms of content (Anderson, 2020). By November 2017, ByteDance had purchased its competitor Musical.ly, which prioritised the same lip-syncing formats for content (Anderson, 2020). As a result, the two applications were merged into a single platform in 2018 retaining the TikTok name (Anderson, 2020). On TikTok, users mainly engage with short-form video content in a vertical format on their personalised 'For You' homepage, swiping up to engage with more videos which are most often recorded to popular trending sounds or capture an original use of the application's format (Anderson, 2020; Borelli & moore, 2021). Considered to be at the forefront of youth culture, the application quickly reached heights of popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform became a 'contemporary space' for youth self-expression (Burchell, 2023; Zeng et al., 2021). Despite holding similar aspects to other social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, according to Zulli and Zulli (2022), TikTok is ultimately set apart due to its unique and prevalent algorithm. With this, the TikTok algorithm analyses what content draws user attention through scroll pace, likes and comments, determining what subsequent videos are shown to the user (Anderson, 2020; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Tolentino, 2019; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Alongside its 'For

You' page, users can engage with content creators they specifically follow on their 'Following' tab alongside utilising the search bar to find content of a specific interest (TikTok, 2025). Weiman and Masri (2023) suggest that the platform leads user creativity with content by providing access to a number of sounds, effects and challenges, pushed by its algorithm.

Relevant to this study, popular forms of fashion content on the application users can engage with include: haul, unboxing or styling videos; 'Outfit of the Day' (OOTD) clips; and informational fashion essay or analysis videos. These content formats are not necessarily unique to TikTok but have found prevalence on the application. Haul videos are fashion content focused on creators showcasing multiple products, with unboxing videos similarly allowing users to live through creators as they unpack a new purchased product (Maguire, 2022; Pangalila & Aprilianty, 2022). OOTD videos feature users showcasing their outfit worn on a specific day, often with the creator describing details of the clothing and accessories worn (Oktaviani & Susilo, 2022). Educational fashion videos or essays may discuss a new collection or forecast a trend (Sangster, 2022) through a longer format. Ultimately, TikTok, through its algorithm and content, has the potential to influence the fashion decision making choices of its users. Furthermore, it may impact how one interprets their own identity through engagement with content either posted by themselves or others.

1.1.2 Fashion and Identity Online

Fashion is widely considered a powerful representation of one's identity, as both identity and fashion continuously change over time (Barnard, 2018; Kawamura, 2005; Tseëlon, 2016). Furthermore, fashion can communicate various aspects of a wearer's personality, values and beliefs (Dolfsma, 2004; Jenkins, 2014). Fashion thus can be understood as a form of communication as it is able to transmit meaning within a wider cultural setting (Barnard, 1996; Barthes, 1983; Belk, 1988). Therefore, there is opportunity to investigate how fashion is communicated and thus understood by Generation Zers within a contemporary online context. Additionally, there is impetus to analyse the role and influence that TikTok has on this cohort, exploring how the application can impact one's fashion decision-making process and potentially one's own perceptions of identity.

Famed sociologist Georg Simmel (1957) explained that fashion focuses primarily on change, likening it to a circle as it consistently returns to and references older styles

as he was one of the first to view fashion as a social phenomenon (Benvenuto, 2000). The nature of the contemporary fashion landscape and the proliferation of fast fashion have resulted in the quickening pace of fashion trends and life cycles (Hufnagel, 2023). Social media applications such as TikTok have encouraged the rise of 'microtrends', understood as fashion trends that quickly rise and fall in popularity, only adopted by a small collective of online users and not by the wider population (Reilly & Hawley, 2019). These modern tendencies are further exacerbated by the dualistic tension once described by Simmel as an inherent conflict between imitation and distinction (Simmel, 1957). Fashion, in this sense, is both a dualistic tension of an individual's desire for uniqueness and the opposite of following social norms or what is currently trending, creating a continuous ongoing cycle - a never-ending tension between the need for imitation and individual distinction (Simmel, 1957). Whilst a comprehensive amount of previous research has focused on Simmel's top-down model of fashion adoption, there is opportunity to apply Simmel's fashion theory within the context of TikTok, as notions of individuality and collectivism gain significance when it is recognised that fashion is a form of communication.

1.2 Research Problem

This current research study seeks to analyse how the application TikTok influences the behaviour, choices and identities of highly fashion-conscious users, that are members of the Generation Z demographic in New Zealand. The current study additionally applies Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory and considers its relevance within the context of TikTok. It questions whether an anticipated tension between individuality and collectivism is navigated by this cohort by analysing their own behaviours and lived experiences. To address these problems, the following research questions were formulated:

1.2.1 Research Questions

- RQ1. How is fashion communicated and understood amongst members of the Generation Z demographic in New Zealand?
- RQ2. What role and influence does TikTok have on the fashion decision making process for highly fashion-conscious Generation Z New Zealanders?

- RQ3. How do highly fashion-conscious Gen Z New Zealanders perceive their own identity through using TikTok?
- RQ4. What is the relevance of Simmel's dualistic fashion theory in interpreting the experiences and behaviours of fashion-conscious Gen Z New Zealanders?
- RQ5: Is there a tension between individuality versus collective identity and how is this experienced and navigated by highly fashion-conscious Generation Z New Zealanders through the application TikTok?

1.3 Methodology

To answer the five research questions and overarching problems, the researcher's chosen epistemology was that of employing a constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998). This study employs interpretivism with a phenomenological approach to understand the underlying phenomena at hand (Gray, 2014). Aligning with this framework, the researcher conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six interviewees who were either current fashion students or individuals connected to the fashion industry, that use TikTok in their daily lives. Participants were chosen due to an expectation of heightened interest and long-term investment in fashion, leading to a deeper level of engagement with the topic through their occupational roles. Furthermore, members of the Gen Z demographic were chosen specifically, as TikTok is considered to be the cohort's domain, with 71% of the platforms' users being between the ages of 18 to 34 (Crepax & Liu, 2024; Stahl & Literat, 2022). Additionally, as the demographic is still currently in their formative years, there is an expected peak of fashion consumption and cultivation of personal style. The interview data is then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify overarching themes, capturing patterns of shared meaning and understanding from interviewees embedded within their answers (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To eliminate potential researcher bias, reflexivity (Braun et al., 2022) was also managed by the researcher practising bracketing and developing a reflexive journal throughout the study.

1.4 Research Significance

This research aims to analyse the role that the social media platform TikTok has on its Generation Z userbase, such as how it influences their fashion choices, behaviours and their own perceptions of identity. The research study provides original insights regarding the Gen Z demographic, exploring how users navigate a platform, including its algorithm. Subsequently, the research findings showcase information about the social media platform and the Gen Z demographic that can contribute towards identity, fashion and social media focused research. This current research also incorporates a unique application of Simmel's (1957) fashion theory of duality, applying it within the contemporary context of the social media platform TikTok. As a result, the research analyses whether the early twentieth century theoretical concept still holds relevance today and if so, how it is interpreted, experienced and navigated by Gen Zers who use TikTok.

1.5 Chapter Overview

As Chapter One, this chapter has provided general context for the research and an introduction to the research problem and questions. It has also highlighted the significance of this current study amidst emerging social trends. Following this, Chapter two presents a detailed literature review of existing work within relevant academic fields. This chapter analyses key aspects of the three key topics of fashion, identity and social media, providing a detailed review of current and past literature, which ultimately informs the direction of this current research. Chapter three discusses the methodology chosen for this study, detailing the researcher's epistemology, theoretical perspective and specific research methods implemented for this study such as identifying an appropriate sample, conducting interviews and thematic analysis. Chapter four introduces four initial themes that emerged through the data analysis. Here, the chapter analyses the subjective experiences of participants such as: how fashion is interpreted; how influence is discerned and navigated; the critical and social awareness participants have towards their own fashion consumption habits and lastly; how identity is navigated whilst engaging with the TikTok algorithm and its content. Chapter five discusses the remaining themes of individuality and trend following but does so specifically through the lens of Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory, reviewing its relevance within the

contemporary context of TikTok and exploring the ongoing tension inherent between imitation and distinction. To conclude, chapter six reviews the research questions identifying how they have been resolved by the study's findings and discusses both the theoretical and practical contributions of the research study. Alongside this, the chapter acknowledges the limitations of this study, whilst suggesting recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Social media, particularly the popular application TikTok, has become a prominent communication platform especially for users that identify as the Generation Z demographic (Stahl & Literat, 2022). Therefore, the platform provides new opportunities for research that can analyse fashion communication, self-representation and the presentation of identity and the 'self' online. This study seeks to understand how fashion is communicated and understood amongst Gen Z fashion students and those connected to the industry, investigating the role and influence that the application TikTok has within their fashion decision making process. Furthermore, this study explores how a specific group of users perceive their own self and fashion identities whilst using the app, by interpreting their lived experiences. Additionally, this study aims to review the relevance of Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory within the online context of TikTok, understanding if there is an apparent tension. Therefore, this chapter provides a review of relevant literature and existing research that underpins, informs and assists this current study, including opportunities in which this research study seeks to further explore.

Firstly, this chapter discusses and defines 'fashion' as a form of communication, followed by an introduction on Simmel's (1957[1904]) seminal article which has provided a foundation for understanding dress through a sociological lens. Focusing on Simmel's dualistic theory, the way in which fashion is adopted and rejected are analysed through a core tension of "individual differentiation" and "social equalisation" (Simmel, 1957). Additionally, top-down and bottom-up models of fashion are explored. Analysis of existing key research identifies that the dualism synthesising between imitation and distinction Simmel (1957) originally introduced is yet to be reviewed within a contemporary online context of TikTok, determining a potential gap within the literature. Following this, fashion life cycles and trends are defined and discussed, contextualising the landscape that the contemporary fashion industry is ultimately influenced by. As fashion and identity are inherently linked (Barnard, 2018; Dolfsma, 2004), relevant theories within social and self-identity research are also discussed, demonstrating the relationship between each. Lastly, social media, in particular the popular application TikTok and its algorithmic 'For You' page is contextualised, illustrating the significant role the application has on its largely Generation Z user base and their day-to-day lives.

2.2 Fashion

2.2.1 Fashion as Communication

To analyse the different aspects of fashion and to identify it as a phenomenon, it is crucial to distinguish the difference between the concept of fashion and clothing itself. The words 'clothing' and 'fashion' are sometimes used interchangeably, but clothing is nearly universal (Lipovetsky, 1994), recognised as the simple materials one wears, whilst fashion carries different social purposes and meanings (Barnard, 1996; Blumer, 1969; Kawamura, 2005; Sproles, 1985). Furthermore, fashion differs from style, as fashion is always shifting and changing whilst a certain style can refer to a long-lasting or temporarily popular cultural reference which can then be affected by fashions (Aspers & Godart; Barnard, 1996; Kawamura, 2005). As this current study focuses on exploring the fashion decision making process amongst highly fashion-conscious users of TikTok, it is important to consider how fashion can be utilised as a communication tool.

Fashion as a concept represents a deeper signifying system of values, ideas and beliefs that are embedded in clothing (Barnard, 1996, 2010; Castaldo Lundén, 2020; Kawamura, 2005). Thus, fashion can be understood as a form of communication and language (Barnard, 1996; Castaldo Lundén, 2020; Tseëlon, 2016), with clothing acting as a vessel for transmitting meanings within a wider cultural context (Barthes, 1983; Belk, 1988; Bukantaitė & Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė, 2024; McCracken, 1986). This implies that what one chooses to wear says something to those around them, such as, wearing heels to convey elegance. Earlier works such as that of Horn and Gurel (1975) argue that clothing itself is a symbol of importance to each person, communicating a range of aspects from individuality, conformity, status, personality and so forth. Barthes (1983) elaborates on how fashion functions as signs, with the meanings conveyed allowing people to understand how to wear fashions within particular cultural and social contexts, as every context holds different meanings. Barthes (1983) argues that fashion itself acts as a language, assisting individuals in expressing their identity and helps position themselves within a wider society (Bukantaitė & Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė, 2024). Similarly, Barnard (1996) frames fashion as a mode of communication, with clothing being picked by individuals depending on the meaning they believe the clothing to hold and the messages one wants to send. Barnard (1996) recognises four

interpreters of fashion in his seminal book, the first taking place with the designer, followed by the wearer, onlookers and lastly the authorities, stressing that interpretation is subject to each individual. Despite interpretation being entirely subjective, it is possible that if interpreters share cultural and social experiences, understanding may correlate (Daylight, 2012). Barnard (2010) stresses that it is not sufficient enough to understand communication as simply sending and receiving messages, rather fashion must be understood as a daily cultural practice, never fixed. For McLuhan (1964) who explores technologies as extensions of the human senses, fashion can be perceived as an extension of skin and the self. McLuhan (1964) argues that fashion conformity creates a social medium, recognising the power of following fashion trends and how clothing holds the power to change both culture and society. Welstein (2013) explores fashion through the lens of media theory, adding that clothing itself acts as a medium of communication, holding the power to spread symbols and cultural meanings. Degaldo et al. (2023) reinforces that fashion functions as symbols, adding to the discussion of fashion being a form of communication in the case of Columbian Generation Z individuals.

From the early 20th century, the study of fashion became a growing topic of interest amongst sociologists, who were curious as to what provoked individual and group behaviour in relation to dress (Kawamura, 2005). Amongst these sociologists was Georg Simmel, who viewed fashion as more than merely material culture, considering it a form of aesthetic pleasure and play (Finkelstein, 1998; Gronow, 1993). Benvenuto (2000) explains that Simmel was one of the first notable sociologists to examine fashion by establishing a general and systematic theory, noting his work today as still relevant despite its age. In his seminal article originally published in 1904, Simmel (1957) explored fashion adoption as dualistic and fixed in social demand, viewing it as a contradictory tension of 'individual differentiation' and 'social equalisation' (Aspers & Godart, 2013; Kawamura, 2005; Mackinney-Valentin, 2014). For Simmel, fashion both assures a person's desire for unique differentiation and allows for group collectivism, manifesting this underlying social conflict of one sticking to social norms and an opposite need to separate from them (Dollhopf, 2011; McCracken, 1988; Simmel, 1957). Thus, for Simmel, central to the concept of fashion is a dualistic tension between imitation and distinction (Benvenuto, 2000; Mackinney-Valentin, 2014).

However, Fuchs (1991) is critical of Simmel's sociology, stating that his writings do not constitute a comprehensive framework for social theory such as that of Karl Marx

or Max Weber for example, claiming his body of work to be too fragmented. With this, Fuchs (1991) further claims that Simmel can only be considered “semi-classic”, as his sociological work only constitutes a small fraction of his writings, adding that he unsystematically draws upon a variety of different movements. Similarly, Frisby (1981) considered Simmel more of an essayist rather than that of a social theorist, claiming his work to be too abstract and philosophical with a lack of empirical evidence.

In contrast to Fuchs (1991) and Frisby (1981), Gronow (1993) argues differently in support of Simmel’s work, with the most thorough account of Simmel’s dualistic fashion theory in terms of social function found in Gronow’s work (1993). Gronow (1993) dissects how Simmel’s general idea of sociology was influenced by Immanuel Kant’s writings on aesthetics, with his original article on fashion commentating on Kant’s idea of universal taste (Gronow, 1993). Gronow (1993) stressed the long-lasting importance of Simmel’s (1957) analysis of fashion, as in comparison to Kant’s writings, a person can partake in mass fashion without losing their sense of individuality or have their own distinct style with the expectation of others sharing it. A number of more recent literature note that Simmel’s (1957) dualistic theory holds continued relevance today, noting how it continues to fuel the modern fashion system despite the differing conditions of fashion consumption (Dollhopf, 2011; Mackinney-Valentin, 2014; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009; Schulz, 2018). Newholm and Hopkinson (2009) for example offer a contemporary lens on fashion and the paradoxical construction of individuality, finding that individuality amongst participants was seen as an accomplishment, claiming that Simmel’s (1957) dualistic theory holds relevance today. Similarly, Dollhopf (2011) supports Simmel’s conformity and originality dynamic, suggesting that two impulses are simply different inclinations towards a singular facet, always changing shape but never disappearing. One of the more recent empirical studies conducted by Mackinney-Valentin (2014) explores Simmel’s fashion theory through the notion of individuality, finding that his ‘fashionable paradox’ is considered still applicable today despite the differing conditions of fashion consumption, adding a modernised and contemporary take on Simmel’s theory of dualism. Schulz (2018) further supports this notion through focusing on fashion companies and how they shift between imitation and distinction, noting the continued relevance of Simmel’s dualistic tension and how it continues to “fuel” the modern fashion system.

Together, whilst these studies have identified the relevance and long-lasting value of Simmel’s original thesis within the modern-day fashion system, there is the

opportunity to analyse how it functions within the context of social media. In turn, this poses the question of whether the theory's relevance still persists within the contemporary online context of TikTok, which this study seeks to understand.

2.2.2 Top Down and Bottom-Up Models of Fashion

An important aspect of fashion adoption amongst wearers is the way in which fashion is diffused and spread. Kawamura (2005) identifies a classical model of diffusion conveyed through Simmel's theory, where new items of dress are first worn by the upper class and then eventually adopted by members of the lower stratum. Critical to understanding Simmel's belief of fashion duality is to recognise that it was based on class distinction. Within a pre-industrial Nineteenth-century society, fashion was an important aspect of conveying class and one's occupation, with social class association being considered a primary part of one's identity (Crane, 2000). Noting a differentiation from one social stratum to another, Simmel expressed that social inferiors of the lower class imitated their social elites, encouraging continuous change to maintain distinction (Crane, 2000; Hufnagel; 2023; Kawamura, 2005; Simmel, 1957). Considered one of the two modern founders of the top-down model of fashion alongside Thorstein Veblen (Aspers & Godart, 2013), Simmel argues that the act of imitation arises out of the wish for class distinction, threatening the upper class and allowing lower class admirers to cross class boundaries (Kawamura, 2005). This model of fashion diffusion is occasionally referenced as the trickle-down theory (Sproles, 1981). Several studies support Simmel's notion of class-differentiation, noting the importance of recognising class and how fashion adoption is ultimately governed by class (Baudrillard, 1981; Bell, 1976; Bourdieu, 1984; König, 1973). König (1973) for example supports and adds to Simmel's notion of class, noting that imitation is not random but instead stems from aspects such as connection, admiration and regard for the person that is imitated. Bell (1976) further viewed fashion similarly to Simmel, finding social class important in understanding the machine of fashion. Baudrillard (1981) supports Simmel's theory, arguing that fashion adoption is ultimately governed by the notion of class.

However, several studies reject Simmel's class-differentiation top-down model and its relevancy, concluding the theory needs revisiting for modern day application within contemporary society (Clark & Lipset, 1991; Davis, 1994; Lipovetsky, 1994; McCracken, 1988; Sellerberg, 1994). Arguments against the top-down model of fashion diffusion support the opposite bottom-up model, in which new dress trends originate in

lower class groups and are then adopted by the upper class (Kawamura, 2005; Sproles, 1981). Most notably, Blumer (1969) opposes Simmel's idea of top-down fashion, noting his analysis is not applicable within the contemporary world as individuals utilise fashion as a form of expressing tastes within an ever-changing society. Blumer (1969) further supports a bottom-up model of fashion, arguing that consumers set fashion trends and that designers must reflect the taste of the masses (Kawamura, 2005). Likewise, McCracken (1988) believes that fashion moves bottom up, arguing towards the increased relevance of influence from the "nouveau riche" such as that of movie stars and music artists rather than members of the upper class. A more recent empirical study conducted by Newholm and Hopkinson (2009) found their data does not support Simmel's (1957) notion of class differentiation, however their findings deem his fashion theory of dualism as still relevant.

Much of the literature argues against this notion of class distinction as flexibility within a more democratic society erases the importance of class boundaries, seeing a liberation of individual dress (Kawamura, 2005). Throughout the twentieth century, dress became increasingly more attainable to a broader span of individuals, entering a new era of fashion democracy as exhibitions of wealth began to incite poor taste (Kawamura, 2005; Lipovetsky, 1994). Crane (2000) states that:

Consumers are no longer perceived as 'cultural dopes' or 'fashion victims' who imitate fashion leaders but as people selecting styles on the basis of their perceptions of their own identities and lifestyles. Fashion is presented as a choice rather than a mandate (p.15).

In this case, individualised dress is established by consumers who source from different places to form their own style with a focus of authenticity and differing meanings for each social group (Crane, 2000; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Through democratising fashion, what once was an exercise of dressing up became an act of 'dressing down' as represented in street style fashion. Having originally emerged as an anti-fashion statement, street style fashion quickly became the new fashionable trend. This was explained earlier as the bottom-up model of fashion, alternatively referred to as the "trickle-up" theory (Kawamura, 2005). Within this model, the fashion industry is driven by the wants of everyday shoppers ranging from different social groups, sources and even subcultures, diffusing to audiences in disparate ways (Kawamura, 2005). Punk fashion for example became heavily commercialised within the mid 1970's in Britain, influencing fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, who were widely considered central to the punk subculture movement (Kawamura, 2005;

McRobbie, 1993). Interestingly, McRobbie (1993) argues that the authenticity and rebellious connotations that the punk movement once embodied became commercialised by designers such as Westwood and McLaren, essentially stripping away and contradicting the subcultures' original purpose through commodification.

This apparent democratisation has also enabled the rise of individual choice and higher levels of purchasing power (Agin, 1999; Lipovetsky, 1994; Thomas, 2007). This is further argued to be enabled through the ability for shoppers to customise their own clothing and the rise of contemporary online fashion blogging throughout the 2000's (Mackinney-Valentin, 2014; Spencer, 2008). Democratisation has additionally impacted the luxury fashion landscape, taking what was once exclusive to the upper strata and catering it to a wide audience through the rise of online shopping for high-end goods from the comfort of one's own home (Thomas, 2007). Furthermore, Muturi (2024) argues that the proliferation of social media platforms has further democratised the fashion world through their ability to provide users with unlimited access to styles, inspiration and influence.

It is crucial to note that not all present discourse agrees with the argument that fashion has become democratised. Horton (2018), through the discussion of mass-produced fashion, notes that despite the fashion industry delivering a faster and quicker output of fashion in the form of fast fashion, it is morally unacceptable and is not aligned with the principles of democracy. Atik et al. (2022) further asserts that the accessibility of fashion towards a wider segment of consumers does not correlate to democratisation. This argument was elaborated as the authors noted how authentic fashion democratisation would entail clothing that departs from idealised Western representations and the rise of dress trends that embrace underrepresented individuals of society that have zero voice (Atik et al., 2022).

However, a number of studies through the discussion of fashion blogging argue towards a fluid notion of both top-down and bottom-up modes of fashion adoption evident today. Rocamora (2011) for example notes that fashion blogs of the early 2010s are considered a cross-section in-between fashion being a structure of representations performed within the media and everyday dress. Sivil (2013) discusses the online fashion blogging website *Style Rookie* popular throughout the early 2010's, arguing that despite *Style Rookie* challenging the fashion hierarchy by establishing a democratic collaborative environment through its community of young fashion bloggers, it still

reinforces elitism through its upper-class founder Tavi Gevinson. Titton (2015) extends a notion of fashion democracy finding that fashion blogging has blurred the distinction between idealised fashion subjects that are built by the fashion industry and the common everyday fashion individuals that now have the power to become trendsetters themselves (Berry, 2010; De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019). Whilst these studies focus on fashion blogging popular throughout the early and mid 2010's, there is opportunity to analyse how fashion is communicated and understood within an updated online context of social media. Taken together, these studies illustrate the opportunity to further explore how fashion is communicated, adopted and understood by Generation Z users through the contemporary online lens of TikTok. Additionally, there is opportunity through this study to review the relevance of Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory and how the ongoing tension inherent between individuality and collectivism functions online.

2.2.3 Fashion Cycles and Trends

With discussions surrounding fashion adoption, the definite truth with fashion is that it is continuously changing (Kawamura, 2005). König (1973) indicates that the two main features that encompass fashion are change and newness, encouraging subtle differences overtime. Simmel (1957) introduces this notion, expressing that "Fashion, to be sure, is concerned only with change... For this very reason, fashion repeatedly returns to old forms, as is illustrated particularly in wearing apparel; and the course of fashion has been likened to a circle" (p. 557). Simmel (1957) elaborates further, explaining that despite past apparel trends having faded through the adoption of newer dress, fashion is often cyclical as what was once trending can resurface after a period of time due to newfound nostalgic appeal (Jenß, 2013). With this, the notion of a fashion cycle is established.

Sproles (1981) introduces two forms of fashion cycles: the first being the long run timeframe where fashion changes every century and secondly, the short run perspective focusing on the life of a singular mode of dress. Within the long run viewed from the period of centuries and decades, newer forms of dress are stylistically adapted with historical continuity, with a single occurrence once within a century or age changing only slightly from the style before (Blumer, 1969; Carman, 1966; Richardson & Kroeber, 1940; Sapir, 1931; Sproles, 1981). This cyclical nature can be evident through Richardson and Kroeber's (1940) study of skirts, where hem lengths lengthened and

shortened over time in a continuous cycle. The short run time frame focuses on a fashion life cycle lasting typically for a few years, with a longer run of five to ten years (Sproles, 1981). Within the short run perspective, Sproles (1981) notes how the fashion cycle is often compared to a product life cycle (Reed, 1987). However, some studies such as Reynolds (1968) argues against likening the fashion cycle to product life cycles, noting that it is instead circular. With the argument of the circular nature of fashion, the popularity of trends is never linear as they may speed up or slow down and can even see changes in direction during the middle of the cycle (Carman, 1966; Miller et al., 1993).

Miller et al. (1993) explain that fashion literature discusses two forms of fashion trends within society, the first being trends that are opposite to the ones that came before it which are understood as cyclical fashion trends, and the second being the 'classic' symbolic item. Sproles (1981) describes classic fashion items as timeless, having been accepted by individuals within the long-term (Miller et al., 1993; Wasson, 1968). The blue pinstriped suit for example can be considered a classic style, as it has and always will be in fashion as a symbolic item of dress (Miller et al., 1993). With cyclical fashion trends, the introduction of fast fashion has not only quickened the timeframe in which clothing is worn by individuals, but also the pace of production, distribution and clothing life cycles (Bauman, 2013; Fernie & Sparks, 1998). Furthermore, the rise of fast fashion has compressed the output cycle by two to three weeks, decimating the creative stage as fast fashion directly copies high-end designer labels and clothing directly from the runway (Carlotto, 2018; Fletcher, 2010). Simmel (2003) notes that the less it costs to follow new fashion, the quicker dress trends change as the cycle quickens (Hufnagel, 2023). In addition to fast fashion, applications such as TikTok have given rise to what is known as a 'microtrend', defined as an accelerated fashion trend that rises to extreme popularity and is quickly replaced, being adopted by only some followers rather than the wider global population (Reilly & Hawley, 2019). Schulz (2024) for example notes how microtrends such as 'quiet luxury' have accelerated the fashion trend cycle through the rise of niche 'cores' and aesthetics that quickly fade.

With the ever-accelerating pace of fashion life cycles and the rise of microtrends, the internet has had an immense impact and role in the wider trend of time-compression (Carlotto, 2018), alongside the speedy rise of digital media at a global reach (Bauman, 2013). Bauman (2013) suggests that the concept of continuity and progression shrinks and separates into pulses and instances. Bauman (2013) further argues that this forms

a hurried culture concerned with newness, in which fast fashion adoption and production add to (Jenß, 2013). However, alongside this, there is also an increased tendency to reuse past fashion, fuelling a memory culture through vintage fashion adoption (Carlotto, 2018; Jenß, 2013). Carlotto (2018) notes that a wider trend of digital ephemerality is closely linked to online networks, as connected users become submerged with a network of relationships surrounding the individual's self which fuels the 'hyper now', which is then reflected within the fashion industry. Vejlgard (2012) argues that the rise of social media platforms plays an ever-growing important role in the proliferating spread of information within the trend process. With this underlying understanding of the fashion cycle, this study seeks to analyse whether the contemporary context of TikTok has affected how fashion is adopted and diffused on the platform.

2.2.4 Fashion Trend Growth and Decline

Related to the fashion cycle, it must be considered why certain trends grow and decline from the outset. Sproles (1985) brings to light three models in understanding the reasons for the adoption and decline of trends: individualism, conformity and motivation for uniqueness. The concept of individualism is central to fashion sociology (McCracken, 1988), in which people favour a personalised style in line with one's own unique tastes, driven by independence and subjectiveness (Lipovetsky, 1994; Mackinney-Valentin, 2014). Sproles (1985) reinforces that individualism is an important motivator in analysing why individuals decide to create new trends and discard outdated fashion. Sproles (1985) explains that as a fashion trend becomes widely adopted and oversaturated, a sense of overstimulation poses a threat. In turn, a sense of boredom is created which fuels individualists to adopt new styles of dress that fundamentally continue the process of new trends (Sproles, 1985). As individualism explains how new fashion trends emerge, the model of conformity describes how widespread trends initially rise to popularity, as people can collectively participate in a wider social environment and gain group approval (Sproles, 1985; Soloviova, 2020). Venkatesan (1966), through conducting exploratory research with 144 college students, suggests that individuals generally tend to comply with the wider group norm to identify as a member. Likewise, Davis and Miller (1983) conducted an experiment with 160 female subjects and found that group influences establish conformity amongst individuals. The authors discovered that participant's original opinions on the fashionability of six women's suits were changed once subjects were exposed to other opinions on the

clothes (Davis & Miller, 1983). Thus, fashion conformity can be linked to wider societal group acceptance and approval, becoming a key driver as to why certain dress trends are adopted by a wider group of people (Sproles, 1985).

A key model that supports the dualistic paradigm of individuality and trend conformity is the uniqueness model created by Snyder and Fromkin (1980). Within this framework, it is proposed that individuals compare themselves in contrast to others, looking for ways in which they are similar and differentiated, which in turn forms a self-identity (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Sproles, 1985). Additionally, individuals seek differences in their style that are still considered socially acceptable to differentiate from those around them, as social conformity places pressure on the individual to want to be different, but not 'too' different (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Sproles, 1985). Paradoxically, Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) argue that individuality is attained through an amalgamation of different conformities that an individual follows, thus the extent to which someone may be considered unique is based on their unique union of compliances (Barnard, 2018). More contemporary literature supports the notion of seeking individuality and showcasing uniqueness (Barnard, 2018; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009). For example, Newholm and Hopkinson (2009) found through their own empirical study that participants want to possess some form of individuality and differentiation in comparison to their peers, however still wanted to 'fit in' with the wider group, showcasing some autonomy and distinction. Whilst Newholm and Hopkinson (2009) provide interesting insight into how individualism is orientated by their participants; the fashion landscape has changed dramatically within the last decade.

2.3 Identity

2.3.1 Fashion and Identity

A recurring theme appearing within existing literature is the notion that fashion and identity are inherently linked. The items of dress an individual chooses to wear represents and communicates various aspects and values of the wearer (Barnard, 2018; Dolfsma, 2004). Additionally, one's personal choice of dress holds enough influence to become a correspondent of one's identity, allowing observers to understand more about an individual such as their attitudes, personality and even their beliefs (Jenkins, 2014). Kawamura (2005) argues that dress is a strong representation of identity due to

both fashion and identity continuously shifting and changing (Barnard, 2018; Tseëlon, 2016). Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2011) assert that one's dress choices should not be mistaken as a stagnant part of one's self-concept, as it changes alongside one's identity (Barnard, 2018).

2.3.2 Social Identity

Kaiser (1997) suggests that identity is an arranged collection of characteristics that an individual believes are representative of themselves within any social network or situation. One's social and self-identities are inextricably linked, as the feeling of individual identity depends upon collective affirmation and approval (Bauman, 1991; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009). As fashion has a social purpose and is an intrinsic part of day-to-day interaction (Blumer 1969; Cannon, 1998; Kawamura, 2005; Sproles 1985), it's very foundation is rooted in group comparison and the continuous adaptation of one's self-concept, driving changes in styles and people choosing to identify with certain groups (Trepte, 2006). In turn, social identity can be defined as the piece of an individual's self-concept that is acquired from the knowledge gained from their inclusion within a collective group, alongside the value attached to belonging in it (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel 1978; Trepte, 2006). A notable concept relating to group identity is that of Henri Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory, which focuses on how people self-categorise through identifying differences and similarities drawn from in and out-group attributes (Hitlin, 2003; Hogg, 2016). At its centre, Tajfel (As cited in Hogg, 2016) explains that social identity surrounds a person's understanding of belonging to a collective group, with value and significance being attached towards being a member. Group membership is formed through the adaptation of common attributes and shared beliefs (Hogg, 2016), which in turn creates collective expectations and conformity (Stets & Burke, 2000). Ellemers et al. (2002) state that both the commitment towards group categorisation and the social environment surrounding the group affects one's central identity. In relation to the discussion of wider identity, Trafimow et al. (1991) argue that social and personal self-identity should be considered separate. As a response, Reid and Deux (1996) argue towards integration of the two, as both are deeply intertwined.

Linking the discussion of fashion and social identity, Akdemir (2018) argues that fashion is one of the most visible forms of social identity expression, not only due to the meanings embedded within them (Davis, 1994), but also because one's fundamental identity expression begins with dress. Crane (2000) notes that one's fashion sense

communicates an ever-continuing impression-making image towards those around them, as one's dress choices plays a large role in the construction of identity. For example, individuals participating in subcultures wear clothing items that are in line with the values of that community, defining themselves as a group against the other parent culture (Hebdige, 1979). Through group membership with others who dress similarly, individuals reflect on both their personal identity through the fashion they choose to wear and their social identity through caring how other group members perceive their style (Crane, 2000; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). This sentiment is reflected within earlier writings of Horn and Gurel (1975), where the authors state that an individual's personal self-concept is a crucial determinant of the roles taken on within the social groups they belong to. Just as fashion and the social world are closely linked, one's self and social identity are interconnected as expressing identity assists in positioning an individual within a wider society (Bukantaitė & Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė, 2024). Thus, despite personal identity being something that is unique to everyone, it is communicated socially (Hitlin, 2003).

2.3.3 Self Identity

Stets and Burke (2000) state that one's self-identity should not be isolated from other identities such as one's social identity, however it does have an all-pervasive hold over the different identities that one has (Barnard, 2018; Stets, 2006). Horn and Gurel (1975) define self-concept and personal identity as a recognition of an individual's existence as a being separate to others, which is understood through interactions with others in society. One's self-concept and personal identity are built from a person's collection of wants and needs, emotions and values and their appearance, in addition to the consciousness one has of their attitudes towards themselves and others (Choi et al., 2020; Horn & Gurel, 1975; Valkenburg, 2017). Burke and Reitzes (1981) illustrate three characteristics to identity; the first being that it is created and maintained from locating the self within one's social world (Stryker, 1968), secondly through engaging with others and lastly, by confirming one's self-concept through presenting oneself to others (Goffman, 1959). Giddens (1991) argues that within a modern-day society, the variety of lifestyles and choices that are available to everyone liberates each individual to make decisions that work to form a meaningful personal identity (Crane, 2000). Crane (2000) continues this notion, arguing that individuals create a sense of self-identity by forming self-narratives, composed of one's past, current day and future. Crane (2000)

explains further that these perceptions are continuously altering over time as one grows and reassesses their self-concept.

The construct of one's self-concept is fluid, constantly changing as it is inherently linked to social life, which is often also linked to the act of performance (Georgiou, 2017). Bauman (2000) argues that performance is an important tool for analysing how individuals view their own personal identities, including how one expresses themselves to others socially. Furthermore, Bauman (2000) states that due to the reflexive nature of performance, it acts as a tool that assists individuals with identity expression. Butler (1990) establishes their own theory of identity stating that just like gender, identity is performative due to its outwardly repetitive and ritualistic nature. Butler (1990) further asserts that each performative iteration of identity is a repeated demonstration of norms, characteristics and gestures that are constructed socially that produces and maintains one's identity (Bogerson, 2005). Burke and Reitzes (1981) argue that due to personal identity's self-reflective nature, there is a connection between the self and how one outwardly expresses themselves through performance as they depend on shared symbols and meanings understood within a culture.

Thus, it can be understood that one's identity is both symbolic and self-reflective, as by interacting with others and learning from their responses, shared meanings are constructed and understood (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Tseëlon, 2016). From this perspective, the ways in which an individual speaks, acts and how they present themselves to others become significant symbols, which transmit deeper meanings to those around them (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Mead, 1934). Existing literature recognises this as symbolic interactionism, a theory originally developed by George Herbert Mead (Horn & Gurel, 1975). Symbolic interactionism theory proposes that all symbols learned by individuals are done so by communicating with those around them socially (Blumer, 1986; Horn & Gurel, 1975; Solomon, 1983; Mead, 1934). Solomon (1983) explains that the ways in which a person understands and navigates their physical world is guided by meanings and symbols learned through their cultural environment. Relating to fashion, dress items are basic objects that are utilised symbolically within day-to-day social interactions (Horn & Gurel, 1975). Kaiser et al. (1991) state that fashion highly withdraws from symbolic interactionism due to fashion itself not possessing any simple meaning, but value is created by society and can only achieve meaning within a social context (Barnard, 2018). Kawamura (2005) notes that fashion holds importance as it represents crucial cultural ideas, as clothing is utilised to communicate deeper symbolic

meanings. Barnard (2010) expresses that dress is an integral part of identity due to its ability to communicate information to others about the wearer at just a glance (Kawamura, 2005).

2.3.4 Symbolic Self-Completion Theory

Alongside the theory of symbolic interactionism in which meanings are formed through interactions with others, existing literature also focuses on self-identity formed through acquiring symbols, understood as symbolic self-completion theory. According to symbolic self-completion theory, individuals acquire particular symbols such as intangible roles or possessions such as wearing relevant pieces of fashion to gain the identity they wish to have (Choi et al., 2020; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1982, 1985). Gollwitzer and Wicklund (1982) state that self-completion symbols assist in signalling an ideal identity to others through either obtaining clothing, accessories and even engaging in certain acts of behaviour. Gollwitzer (1986) stresses that one's self-presentation is in essence self-constructive, as individuals possess a need to be noticed socially and in turn, this acknowledgement is incorporated into their actual self (Baumeister, 1998; Choi et al. 2020). Thus, one's self-presentation is more concerned with self-judgement and continual acts of improvement rather than strategic displays towards others (Gollwitzer, 1986). Crane (2000) similarly argues that not only do individuals attain more items to keep up with current trends to continually construct an ideal self, but one believes that fashion allows them to create their ideal self-concept and lifestyle. Focusing on social media platforms, Choi and Sung (2018) examine how self-presentations are expressed by users on different social networking sites. Through conducting 547 online surveys, the authors find that true self-presentations are most prominent on the platform Snapchat, whereas Instagram is linked to more idealised and strategic self-presentations. Choi et al. (2020) find that social media affordances such as ephemeral videos and a platform's stories feature increase non-strategic self-symbolising efforts and self-presentations. As a result, an individual's 'true self' is increasingly attributed to short-lived affordances and disappearing content in comparison to permanent posts (Choi et al., 2020). Delgado et al. (2023) support the theory of self-completion by analysing Gen Z users that communicate through TikTok and fashion trends that proliferate on the app. Delgado et al. (2023) further note that clothing is used as a tool for identity self-completion through both tangible items such as accessories, makeup and interior design and intangible elements such as poses and behaviour which all contribute to curation. In turn, there is opportunity to further explore

how fashion-conscious Gen Z users navigate and perceive their own identity presentations whilst using TikTok, alongside how they perceive other creators on the application as well.

2.3.5 Self Representation Online

Linked to self-identity, it is important to analyse how one's personal concept is represented within the public environment online and the various communities within it. On social media, self-representations spread between different individuals and communities, assisting in creating and maintaining relationships with others and the possibility for one's identity to be formed (Van Dijck, 2008). These 'networked publics' (boyd, 2010; Gillespie, 2014; Ito, 2008; Varnelis, 2008) utilised for socialising are built around similar social practices and shared identities through the creation of user profiles (boyd, 2014). Kay (2018) stresses the importance of social context predominantly amongst younger generations interacting with the online world, as external group validation is heightened within these spaces and one's individual's self-representation is given a platform. Through the creation of online profiles, spaces for conversation and communities are formed, becoming a hub for self-representation that users may not possess full control over (boyd, 2010). boyd (2014) further notes that identity does not operate similarly amongst differing online spaces, as social media users can alter their representations of themselves to suit recognised social norms that are evident on each application. Each social networking service is known to have unique affordances that uniquely separates the platform from others (boyd, 2010). A key feature of TikTok's platform is the 'For You' feed. This feed relies on an algorithm to push unique content to each user. It has been widely attributed to building communities through trending challenges, sounds and hashtags (Blanco Borelli & moore, 2021; Zhang, 2021), playing a significant role in driving today's 'cultural mindset' (boyd, 2014). Relating to self-representations on the application, Lee et al. (2022) analysed 24 qualitative interviews to identify how TikTok's algorithm communicates an individual's understanding of their own identity/ies. They found that participants feel positively towards their algorithmic 'For You' pages, believing their identity is accurately represented on the app as the content taps into each of their various personal interests (Lee et al., 2022). Lee et al. (2022) further explain that the algorithm leads participants of the study to believe that they are all individual and multifaceted, as the content interacted with continuously changes over time. As a result, the participants of the study believed that TikTok accurately portrays self-representations and their fluid identities (Lee et al., 2022). In

turn, this study seeks to analyse if current Generation Z users feel the same way, exploring how they perceive their own identities as a result of being exposed to fashion content that is fed to them by the algorithm.

2.3.6 Self Performance and Presentation Online

An aspect that continues to reappear within existing literature is the concept of identity performance and presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959). Erving Goffman famously presented a juxtaposition between how one presents the self socially and that of theatre performance. As Goffman (1959) describes, when a person interacts socially, their self-esteem is impacted by their identification within a group. Goffman defines self-presentation as the tools one uses to create an impression towards others as they interact socially, communicating and controlling their preferred self-image they put out that aligns with the collective group (Goffman, 1959). Furthermore, he defines an interaction in this context as any occurrence where an individual is continually within another person's presence, defining 'performance' as any activity that aims to influence other participants (Goffman, 1959). Much of the existing literature argues that identity is a form of performance whether offline, online, or through analysing monitored or deregulated spaces (Alfarid Hussain, 2015; Buckingham, 2008; Butler, 1990; Choi et al., 2020; Cover, 2015; Georgiou, 2017; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010). Existing research on self-presentation extends Goffman's original argument, analysing it within mass media (Meyrowitz; 1985) and more recently, social media (Alfarid Hussain, 2015; Georgiou, 2017; Mendelson & Papacharissi 2010). Alfarid Hussain (2015) applies Goffman's work through the social media application Facebook, finding that the platform can be interpreted as a 'front stage' (Szulc, 2019). The author further notes that applications such as Facebook allow users to build identities as a form of performance towards other users, likening them to an audience (Alfarid Hussain, 2015). Similarly, Georgiou (2017) analyses Goffman's theories through social media, arguing that self-presentation online is also a form of performance and a way of locating one's self-identity online through acting in certain ways that carry specific meanings and messages. More recently, Choi et al. (2020) analysed self-presentations on social media and found that users believe that the temporal 'stories' feature showcases higher levels of genuine self-representation rather than 'posts' which remain published.

The nature of social media provides an environment for identity creation, as users have the option to construct their self-identities as they choose, whether genuine

or idealised (Choi et al. 2020; Ellison et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2008). Social networking services, as new media, facilitate the creation of collective online spaces, supported by individual profile creation (Alfarid Hussain, 2015). With unique user profiles, a network of connections can be created and displayed through a friend list, which can a form of self-presentation for users (Donath & boyd, 2004; Mendelson & Papacharissi 2010). Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) stress that social networking platforms allow users to present certain facets of themselves to their followers through their profiles, which can concurrently showcase individuality and common connection with others online. Alongside account creation, boyd (2010) argues that one's friends list is not the only intended public for users, noting that the imagined audience acts as a motivator for users to adjust and shape their self-presentations to align with the norms expected from that group. Thus, profile creation on social networking sites alongside other offline and online performances can be acknowledged as a set of identity performances that composes the self (Cover, 2015; Szulc, 2019). Similar to physical spaces, online platforms offer users visibility, communication and a space for interaction (Gillespie, 2014). An early TikTok study conducted by Zuo and Wang (2019) finds that users on the app interact with other accounts to assist in shaping and validating their own identities. As a result, TikTok users generate self-assurance from this sense of identity, however they do not feel pressured to change due to the perceptions of others (Zuo & Wang, 2019). Interestingly, Hernández-Serrano et al. (2022) analyse self-presentations of users through examining the Instagram and TikTok profiles of Spanish youth. The authors find that one's self-presentation is not necessarily guided by social opinion, as 'likes' were deemed irrelevant whilst users are motivated by authenticity and truthfulness (Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022). Supporting Goffman's work, Burchell (2023) explores the ways that self-performance is demonstrated on TikTok through centring on trends, aesthetics, beauty standards, and their relationship to the algorithm. However contradictory, the author also finds that one's agency becomes muddled because of traditional beauty standards in which the algorithm proliferates through aesthetics and trends, reinforcing the importance of likes and ideal self-presentations on the app (Burchell, 2023).

Linking back to the realm of fashion in terms of self-presentation, Goffman's argument of performed identity can also be applied here. Through conducting empirical research, Tseëlon (2016) supports Goffman's idea of identity inherently being a performance, stating that fashion is a key instrument in self-assembly. However, the

author additionally notes that their research does not support Goffman's original idea of the manipulative public front stage and the authentic backstage, instead finding that both behaviours are intricate performances with neither being more authentic (Tseëlon, 2016). This suggests that the formation of one's identity, in terms of fashion, is possibly a complex never ending dress rehearsal (Tseëlon, 2016). Smelik and Kaiser (2020) argue that fashion is especially performative in nature as seen during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, as individuals, for example combine formal tops in view of the camera and sweatpants that are hidden from view. The authors further discuss how individuals dress for the public gaze online, blurring the lines between costume and real life, agreeing with the belief that the theatrical nature of performance is fitting for the study of fashion and one's outward appearance (Smelik & Kaiser, 2020; Tseëlon, 2016). Additionally, Smelik and Kaiser (2020) stress that the single act of placing together an outfit to wear attaches an aspect of performance, as an individual places an outfit together with the concept of an audience in mind (Tseëlon, 2016). With this, there is opportunity through this research to explore the notions of self-presentation and performance amongst users on the TikTok app, analysing how fashion-conscious Gen Zers truly perceive others and in turn, their own identities whilst engaging with content.

2.4 Social Media

Alongside focus on the areas of fashion and identity over the course of the last century, it is also necessary to review relevant literature regarding social media. With this, it is crucial to firstly explore how social media users receive, interpret and reject the messaging of media texts, alongside their role as active users of platforms they engage with. In his seminal work originally published in 1973, Hall (1993) argues that viewers whilst engaging media can take three positions whilst reading the media text: receiving and accepting the dominant messaging; taking a negotiated position; or opposing the messaging of the content. Hall (1993) reinforces the notion that audience members engaging with the media text are not simply passively intaking what is fed to them, however, are competent and in control of the messaging they choose to accept or critique.

2.4.1 Online Trends and 'Trending'

To discuss fashion content and in turn, trends that permeate online, it is principal to firstly explore the concept of a trend generally, alongside why certain information becomes 'trending' and/or viral. Within the world of social media, users are exposed to an abundance of information every day through online social interactions such as liking, resharing, replying, mentioning and commenting on posts and videos (Crane & Sornette, 2008; Zhang et al., 2016). This fuels the spread of information and ideas which gather the attention of wider groups, resulting in the creation of social media trends (Crane & Sornette, 2008; Zhang et al., 2016). Online trends typically represent common topics that individuals find interesting, signifying collective attention (Ferrara et al., 2014), reflected through the traction of those topics and the use of associated hashtags (Lehmann et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2016). It can be observed that even social media platforms have embedded the notion of 'trending' content into the interface of their web pages and applications. 'Trending' content can be described as a mass group of individuals engaging with a certain topic of interest online by either simply consuming what is uploaded by others or creating user-generated-content about the topic themselves (Uti, 2022). Online fashion trends for example can reach viral status within the timespan of days or even hours, fuelled by mass liking, sharing and commenting, which can result in quick adoption by fellow fashion-focused individuals (Muturi, 2024). Much of the existing research agrees that favourable topics and rising events are caused by the dynamic of collective based attention or a group response rather than singular opinion leaders, forming popularity spikes and trends (Asur et al., 2011; Bao et al., 2013; Ferrara et al., 2014; Gomez-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Harrigan et al., 2012; Lehmann et al., 2012; Romero et al., 2011; Wu and Huberman, 2007). However, Zhang et al. (2016), through analysing the Twitter-like Chinese platform Weibo, suggest that the collective group plays an important role within the beginning stages of a trend formation. They add that the later participation of key opinion leaders in turn creates wider coverage, resulting in the formation of a widely recognised trend.

An extensive amount of existing literature analysing trends and what is trending focusses on the social media application X, previously Twitter, as it is one of the first platforms to showcase a trending topics feature in 2008 (Asur et al., 2011; Girginova, 2020; Harrigan et al., 2012; Lehmann et al., 2012; Romero et al., 2011; Weng et al., 2013). Through their own analysis of trending topics on Twitter, Asur et al. (2011) argue that individual resonance plays a crucial role in the cause of trends. Additionally, the

authors find that a large amount of the content arises from mainstream media accounts, which are then amplified by individual user retweets (Asur et al., 2011). Similarly, Girginova (2020) takes a multimethod approach to analyse more than 15 million tweets with the hashtag #Rio2016, covering the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. The author concludes that trends on the platform emerge due to emotional rather than rational reactions and that on Twitter, mainstream media largely dominate and decide what topics trend on the platform (Girginova, 2020). Harrigan et al. (2012) analyse a community on Twitter throughout a five-month period, finding that collective group structures increase social contagion and the spread of trends. The authors find that smaller yet connected groups with personal ties or connection to the poster are more likely to retweet and spread information. Similarly, Weng et al. (2013) explore community structure on the platform in relation to the spread of trending memes, discovering that groups on the application play a crucial role on the dissemination of trends as expectedly, the more communities a meme permeates within the higher levels of virality it sees. Taken together, these adjacent studies pose the opportunity to analyse the roles and impact that fashion trends permeating on TikTok have on the platforms' Generation Z user base.

2.4.2 The Fashion and Beauty Landscape on Social Media

The use of social media as an online platform (Gillespie, 2014) has become an influential instrument for the world of fashion, as it allows for the immediate spread of user-generated online trends that are popular amongst Centennials (Tomovska, 2020). Much of the existing literature relating to social media trends and its effect on users focuses on image-centred platforms such as Instagram in relation to body image and how beauty standards are perpetrated on these spaces (Liu & Li 2023; Panjraht & Tiwari, 2021; Rousseau, 2024; Sokolova et al., 2022; Uti, 2022). Rousseau (2024), for example, explores the platform Instagram and its negative promotion of unrealistic outward appearances. The author concludes that seeing more body-positive content on the application can assist in positive self-image perceptions amongst female users. Sokolova et al. (2022) empirically explore Instagram and the platforms' exposure of the female body image. The authors find that the application normalises objectifying images shown to users, with audience acceptance of uncovered bodies being more prominent amongst conventionally attractive females (Sokolova et al., 2022). Liu and Li (2024) analyse popular fashion and beauty trends by examining Chinese social media application RED. The authors conclude through the "Brandy Melville Girl" and "Uniqlo-

Sanrio Girl” representations on the platform, traditional harmful beauty standards such as slimness are still communicated online as the retailer Brandy Melville sells clothing in only one size.

More recently, focus in research has shifted to the power of social media influencers and how they can reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and idealised body image (Claeys et al., 2024; Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021; Lopez & Islam, 2021; Neal, 2018; Panjraath & Tiwari, 2021; Prichard et al., 2023; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). Tiggemann and Anderberg (2020), for example, analyse male Instagram influencers and the effect of idealised body image representations have on their followers, concluding that the repeated exposure to muscular images causes lower levels of body satisfaction and harmful effects for men. However, Panjraath and Tiwari (2021) find that despite having negative effects on mental health, wellbeing and causing body discontent, influencers also have a positive effect on motivation and inspiration amongst followers regarding the newest trends. Claeys et al. (2024) similarly investigate influencers and the growing trend of embracing authenticity through the increase of casual posting and how this affects followers. The authors discover that genuine self-presentation inevitably results in positive effects on followers’ well-being and increases self-worth (Claeys et al., 2024).

In addition to body image and beauty standards, existing research examines social media influencers and their role and impact on trending fashion (Abidin, 2016; Casaló et al., 2020; De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Jin et al., 2019; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020; Santiago & Magueta, 2020). Through analysing the data collected from 808 followers of a fashion-based Instagram account, Casaló et al. (2020) discover that high levels of uniqueness is an important aspect for creators to be considered influential by their followers. This observation aligns with earlier work such as that of Workman and Kidd (2000), who argue that fashion leaders possess a higher need for uniqueness and active differentiation, suggesting that this may drive consumers to do the same. Djafarova and Bowes (2021) used eight focus groups to suggest that micro-celebrities still hold primary influence on Generation Z’s fashion purchases, inevitably setting fashion trends (Martínez-Estrella et al., 2023). Whereas De Perthuis and Findlay (2019) argue that the algorithm and design of social media platforms such as Instagram, shape how users create meaning from their feeds noting that the algorithm holds more influence. De Perthuis and Findlay (2019) further argue that the fashion media environment has become more interconnected and networked,

noting that whilst more subcultural styles are showcased, dominant ideals persist. Adding to this notion, Kay et al. (2020) find that smaller content creators or ‘micro-influencers’ who have lower levels of likes in comparison to ‘macro-influencers’ increased the purchase intent of users due to the fewer number of sponsorship disclosures within their product endorsements.

Alongside research on influencers and body image, existing literature extensively focuses on their effect on generational groups, largely focusing on millennial users who precede Generation Z (Absharina et al., 2021; Jansom & Pongsakornrunsilp, 2021; Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022; SanMiguel et al., 2018). Jegham and Bouzaabia (2022) analyse the relevance of social media influencer marketing, concluding that perceptions of leadership amongst their female millennial followers depends on the creator’s credibility and content originality. SanMiguel et al. (2018) explore how influencers affect the behaviours of millennial users in terms of fashion buying. The authors find through conducting both qualitative and quantitative research that women trust recommendations made by their close circles, however, also find confidence in fashion decisions through using influencers as a reference point (SanMiguel et al., 2018). Whilst these studies offer an interesting insight into how millennial users respond to influencers, there is opportunity through this study to explore whether content creators have any influence over Generation Z users. Despite limited research on the Gen Z demographic, a growing focus of recent studies have begun to focus on how beauty standards affect the cohort (William et al., 2024). William et al. (2024) analyse 100 top beauty influencers through conducting both content analysis and 20 interviews with Generation Zers, discovering what types of beauty social media influencers sell. The authors find that ‘Sensual’ and ‘Erotic’ forms of beauty are what are showcased to Gen Z users; however, this does not resonate with the cohort which prefer ‘Cute’ and ‘Girl Next Door’ beauty (Williams et al., 2024). The authors further find that their participants prioritise authenticity, preferring beauty that is achievable, attainable and easy to replicate (Williams et al., 2024).

2.4.3 TikTok and Fashion

Whilst beauty has been a focus of previous literature, newer studies are also considering fashion in the context of social media applications such as TikTok (Crepax & Liu, 2024; Hammond, 2023). Crepax and Liu (2024) explore the affective “nostalgia” core aesthetic born during the COVID-19 pandemic on TikTok, most prominently

through 'Point of View' (POV) videos evoking feeling and memory rather than specific dress trends. The authors find that even though the aesthetic itself is not related to any visual items of dress, it arises from inspiration as a type of gratification which could develop the future of fashion and see a possible escape from the ever-speeding cycle of cyclical fashion trends (Crepax & Liu, 2024). Hammond (2023) explores how viral fashion trend videos affect the purchase intentions of Gen Z users, finding that parasocial interactions, levels of trust and favourability of the creator impact their willingness to be influenced by the trends exemplified in the video. Pangalila and Aprilianty (2022) also explore fashion on TikTok by analysing the rise of fashion 'haul' videos, a form of fashion video content on the platform where users showcase a high number of dress items either bought or gifted. Through conducting 13 qualitative semi-structured interviews and 204 quantitative online questionnaires with Indonesian Gen Zers, the authors found that the video format has an immense impact on the cohort's purchasing decisions driven by whether the user accepts the information in the video. Through this current study, there is an existing gap and opportunity to analyse whether fashion content such as haul videos on TikTok appeal and influence the purchasing decisions of Generation Zers within the context New Zealand. Additionally, the ways one navigates trends online may be reflective of Simmel's (1957) dualistic notion between imitation and distinction.

2.4.4 TikTok and Generation Z

As Crepax and Liu (2024) explain, those in the Generation Z and younger bracket of the Millennial demographic, are the most prominent users engaging with the app. 71% of TikTok's user base are between the ages of 18 to 34 years of age, with more than half of all users being under the age of 24. As such, the application is likely a formative aspect of Gen Z's collective identity (Bolin, 2017; Zeng et al., 2021). In turn, the platforms' influence extends beyond a domain for entertainment, and it is perceived to have a significant effect on this cohort's behaviours and attitudes as a general site of youth culture (Burchell, 2023; Ha et al., 2024; Kennedy, 2020; Machirori, 2023; Stahl & Literat, 2022; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). By analysing 1918 videos with the tag #GenZ, including their comment sections, Stahl and Literat (2022) discovered that as a cohort, Gen Z portray themselves through an amalgamation of contrasts such as confidence and vulnerability. The authors find that video content on the platform embraces a strong generational identity that is different to those that came before it, showcasing a collective based spirit and a sense of community (Stahl & Literat, 2022). Alongside this,

Vițelar (2019) also finds that members of the Generation Z demographic are highly conscious of their personal branding online, as it is considered an integral part of one's self-expression and differentiation. Through exploring TikTok fashion content, Delgado et al. (2023) find that Colombian Gen Z users are susceptible to trends and content disseminated on the app, noting each trend is adjusted in accordance with social and localised contexts with different personalised meanings. The authors further argue that as a result, Generation Z users are naturally inclined to change identities as trends are adopted in symbolic ways (Delgado et al., 2023). While Delgado et al. (2023) provide valuable insight into how Generation Zers navigate trends in South America, few studies have explored fashion trend navigation in Oceania. In turn, this current study explores how Generation Z users in New Zealand navigate and experience fashion content on the application, analysing whether their own identity perceptions are impacted by the content they engage with.

2.4.5 TikTok and the #Algorithm

Whilst TikTok has standardised social media affordances such as profile creation and the option to follow friends and send messages akin to Facebook and Instagram (boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2014), the production of creative and original video content is the primary use for the application (Sadler, 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Instead of positioning itself as a static platform within the wider social media ecosystem, the applications' identity is continuously altering due to the very nature of the platform and user interactions with their personalised algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Algorithms in their very nature are designed to decode what information is 'trending' and most relevant towards users (Gillespie, 2014). According to Zeng and Abidin (2021), content discovery on the application is primarily driven by the nature of its algorithm, which in turn holds the potential to impact the perceptions of one's identity which this study seeks to analyse. TikTok's algorithm senses what captures each user's attention through scrolling pace, likes and comments (Tolentino, 2019). The application additionally encourages user creativity through the use of sounds, effects and challenges presented by the algorithm, resulting in users joining the trend and the formation of subsequent micro-communities (Abidin, 2020; Lehto Brewster, 2024; Rogers, 2021; Tolentino, 2019; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022; Weimann & Masri, 2023; Zeng et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Alongside the algorithmic nature of TikTok, how users enact a form of surveillance culture on the application is also useful to recognise. Lyon (2007) explains the rise of a 'surveillance society', in which the contemporary world has become permeated with the gaze of surveillance and a constant, inescapable experience. Jones (2020) explains through the use of Facebook pages that users on these platforms enact 'surveilling' by monitoring or even auditing the activity of other users. Lyon (2024) has more recently argued that surveillance culture has become a normalised aspect of one's everyday life online, as scrolling one's feed becomes an everyday act of monitoring and 'policing' peers. With this, Lyon (2024) extends the idea of a normalised and integrated experience of surveillance, in which policing content online has the potential to adapt user attitudes and behaviours, becoming an enjoyable experience as one simultaneously becomes watched as well as the watcher of others. Through this notion of "policing" fashion content, this in turn may provide an additional lens towards how users of TikTok watch one another online, even refresh the idea of the "fashion police". With this, there may be implications for fashion content specifically on the platform TikTok, in which this study seeks to analyse. Additionally, there is space to analyse the influence of the algorithm in relation to the cohort's self-identity perceptions, examining how the group as users engage with the platform and its fashion content.

2.5 Conclusion

Altogether, this chapter has at first explored existing literature regarding how fashion acts as a communicative tool, indicating that it holds the ability to transmit deeper meanings within a broader sociocultural setting. In turn, there is opportunity through this current research study to extend this notion within the contemporary online context of TikTok, examining how highly fashion-conscious users form meanings and interpretations through consuming or uploading fashion content on the app. Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory of imitation and distinction was also introduced, suggesting the formation of never-ending fashion cycles that continue to change as they reference older styles. Additionally, the quickening cycle of fashion trends as a result of fast fashion and the recent phenomena of TikTok microtrends were introduced, showing ample opportunity to review these modern tendencies through Simmel's notion of dualism.

Relevant theories of social and self-identity highlight the complex and simultaneously shared and personal nature of identity. In turn, fashion and identity are revealed to be inextricably linked, providing opportunity to further examine TikTok's role and influence on the fashion decision-making processes of its users, and in turn their own identity perceptions. Subsequently, this chapter has examined notions of popular or viral content and the concept of 'trending', including social media trends with a large focus on complementary topics such as beauty and body image. An extensive review of current literature revealed a primary focus on the Millennial cohort and social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, whilst this current study identifies an opportunity to contribute to the small but ever-growing field of Generation Z focused research with a focus on TikTok. In turn, there is potential to understand whether the application has any form of impact and influence on its users and their choice of dress through the form of fashion trends and content engaged with on the platform. The following chapter will describe the chosen methodology that this study utilises in order to assist in answering the research questions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The Literature Review chapter provided a detailed review of the existing literature used to guide this current research study. The chapter revealed the opportunity to apply Simmel's dualistic notion between individuality and trend following within a contemporary online context. Additionally, the chapter highlighted the opportunity to explore how fashion is navigated and orientated by Generation Z users, and how identity perceptions are impacted through usage of the TikTok application. As a result, this study aims to understand how fashion is communicated and understood by this cohort, alongside the role and impact that TikTok has on Generation Z's fashion decision-making choices and if so, their own personal identity formation. Subsequently, this research also proposes to further re-examine Simmel's dualistic fashion theory, assessing its potential relevancy within the context of the TikTok application. The study seeks to explore five research questions:

- RQ1. How is fashion communicated and understood amongst members of the Generation Z demographic in New Zealand?
- RQ2. What role and influence does TikTok have on the fashion decision making process for highly fashion-conscious Generation Z New Zealanders?
- RQ3. How do highly fashion-conscious Gen Z New Zealanders perceive their own identity through using TikTok?
- RQ4. What is the relevance of Simmel's dualistic fashion theory in interpreting the experiences and behaviours of fashion-conscious Gen Z New Zealanders?
- RQ5: Is there a tension between individuality versus collective identity and how is this experienced and navigated by highly fashion-conscious Generation Z New Zealanders through the application TikTok?

This chapter outlines the study's methodological approach and outlines the methods of data collection and analysis. Additionally, this chapter explains how the research study will ensure trustworthy findings through careful application of qualitative methods.

3.2 Research Process

Crossan (2003) argues that, for the researcher to be able to answer the overarching problems and questions presented to them, it is important to consider how one's presumptions in relation to their lived experiences, personal values and beliefs justify the use of methods and methodology.

The primary researcher identifies as part of the older Generation Z social demographic, aligned with the intended participants. Whilst the researcher does not currently study fashion nor is working within the industry; they engage with fashion content daily and are familiar with current fashion trends and the different fashion communities on TikTok through personal interest. The primary researcher also recognises that they can be influenced by fashion content they consume on the application, following specific content creators in addition to algorithmically curated content delivered via their 'For You' page. Through this, the researcher recognises that these biases may shape the research process and bring potential bias as someone who is additionally impacted by fashion content on the application.

Thus, the presumptions of the researcher in relation to fashion, TikTok usage and being part of the Generation Z demographic were understood and utilised to navigate the research process and ultimately decide on the chosen approach. Crotty (1998) details four crucial aspects that guide the research process. The first aspect being epistemology, secondly the theoretical perspective chosen, thirdly the methodological approach and lastly the methods used which encompasses the data collection, sampling and analysis method (Crotty, 1998; Descatoires, 2017). With this, the study utilises a constructivist epistemological approach, which in turn informs the theoretical perspective of interpretivism alongside Simmel's dualistic fashion theory. The methodological position of this research falls under phenomenology, which informs the methods utilised of semi-structured interviews and the process of reflexive thematic analysis.

3.2.1 Epistemology: Constructivism

As Creswell (2007) explains, any research viewpoint that is undertaken is guided by the philosophy that is held by the researcher, which ultimately informs the research design. Crotty (1998) defines epistemology as "a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (p. 3). Maynard (1994) suggests that the essence of

epistemology is concerned with contributing a philosophical basis that determines what forms of knowledge are feasible, guaranteeing that they are not only legitimate, but also acceptable (Crotty, 1998; Steup & Neta, 2024). Creswell (2007) notes that an epistemological approach aims for closeness and to minimise distance between the researcher and the participants studied.

This current research seeks a deep understanding of the participants' experiences of fashion, communication and identity, and uses the epistemological perspective of constructivism to do so. Crotty (1998) defines the constructivist worldview as “the individual human subject engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them” (p. 79). Crotty (1998) describes that this worldview focuses on how people construct and ascribe their own meanings and understandings of the world in which they live and interact with (Gray, 2014), as a product of their own unique experiences and beliefs. Creswell (2007) adds that these understandings that one has are forged through interactions with others and one’s way of behaving, allowing an individual to make meanings and sense of their own world Applefield et al. (2001) describe constructivism through the context of students in high school, with constructivism involving students making their own effort to construct their own learnings and understandings. As the focus of this research aims to understand each individual participant’s unique viewpoints (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998) and how they make sense of the fashion content they engage with, the constructivist worldview is considered most appropriate. By interacting with fashion content and the online world through social media, it is expected that participants will construct their own subjective understandings and interpretations (Crotty, 1998).

With employing constructivism, the researcher also recognises that social constructionism can additionally be applicable to this current research. Crotty (1998) explains that within this worldview, meaning is not discovered; it is socially constructed once an individual interacts and engages with the world around them. Furthermore, Crotty (1998) stresses that meaning and understanding is not found within the object itself, but instead constructed by the social context that the object is in. As an individual’s fashion sense can be recognised as a common form of social identity expression of one’s self-identity, the two are inherently linked (Akdemir, 2018; Hitlin, 2003). With this, both perspectives are considered relevant to the current research study.

3.2.2 Theoretical Perspective and Methodology: Interpretivism and Phenomenological Research

Crotty (1998) explains that the theoretical perspective can be understood as the philosophy embedded within the epistemology, which in turn informs the methodology chosen and provides the groundwork for the research. Gray (2014) argues that the theoretical perspective of interpretivism seeks to comprehend an individual's understanding of a social world through their own mind, stressing that it is closely linked to the epistemology of constructivism. Additionally, Khan (2014) suggests that with the interpretivist worldview, reality is subjective to everyone as each person forms their own understandings of the world created through their own contexts (Khan, 2014). Thus, interpretivism was chosen as this research seeks to understand how Gen Zers interested in fashion use TikTok to perceive and construct their own identities whilst also informing wider social trends. Furthermore, interpretivism was deemed most appropriate for this current study as these subjective experiences and interpretations will be revealed through discussions with participants (Creswell, 2007). In doing this, different interpretations from participants can be identified by the researcher (Creswell, 2007), assisting in understanding their underlying experiences.

Gray (2014) argues that within the approach of interpretivism, the application of phenomenology is the most naturally aligned with the worldview of constructivism. Gray (2014) further stresses that under phenomenology, descriptions of the lived phenomenon encountered by a certain group of individuals can arise from their first-hand experiences. Gray (2014) adds that in doing this, the researcher puts away their own existing understandings and encounters with the topic at hand for new meanings to be made. Cilesiz (2009) for example, applied descriptive phenomenology in order to analyse computer use in Internet cafes. Interviewing Turkish adolescents, the author discovered that the essence of the phenomena was revealed to be community building and formation of identity (Cilesiz, 2009; Valentine et al., 2018). With this, phenomenology was chosen as this study aims to understand the experiences of Gen Zers who either study or work in fashion, and how they navigate the application TikTok in regard to this interest. Shared phenomena can then arise through analysis of their collated responses to research questions. Additionally, this research applies Simmel's (1957) theory of fashion dualism, analysing its relevance through the application TikTok by interpreting the narratives of the participants interviewed.

The chosen theoretical stance influences the methodology, recognised as the chosen strategy, plan and design of the research (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2014). Utilising the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, the methodology employed for this research is phenomenological research (Gray, 2014). Gray (2014) argues that phenomenological research aims to explore the meaning created by a group of similar individuals and their shared experiences, better understanding the underlying phenomenon experienced. For Creswell (2007), phenomenological research aims to grasp the nature of the human experience, rather than describing the subject that is experiencing the phenomena or what it is simply about. Matua and Van Der Wal (2015) describe phenomenology through two tensions being either descriptive or interpretive. Descriptive phenomenology emphasises the completely detached observer through descriptions of the real-life encounters, whilst interpretive phenomenology conversely emphasises an engaged interpreter (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). Stewart and Mickunas (1990) stress that whilst taking a phenomenological approach, it is important for the researcher to remove all preconceptions and patterns of thought that can potentially cause bias in the findings (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Husserl, 1931). Whilst both approaches are relevant to this study, interpretive phenomenology is predominantly utilised due to the researcher's proximity to the topic. However, bracketing as part of descriptive phenomenology is concurrently recognised as a useful control for potential researcher bias.

3.2.3 Methods: Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews and Thematic Analysis

Crotty (1998) defines the methods stage as the process used to both generate and analyse data in order to either answer a research question or to test a hypothesis. Gray (2014) argues that qualitative studies undertaking a phenomenological approach most commonly utilise semi-structured interviews for data collection as structured interviews in comparison are most often used in quantitative positivist research (Joffe, 2011). Gray (2014) further suggests that through conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews, this allows for the exploration of subjective meanings and interpretations described by participants through probing questions. Legard et al. (2003) argue that an advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews is the interactive nature of the process, as a researcher's initial question, once answered, can naturally prompt the next question to be asked. As each participant has their own identities, experiences, influences and attitudes, probing through semi-structured interviews can assist in interpreting each participant's answers. Whilst unstructured interviews were additionally

considered for this study, it was deemed less suitable as there was possibility that the researcher could influence the interview direction (Gray, 2014). With this, semi-structured in-depth interviews were considered the most appropriate approach for data collection as this study seeks to uncover the opinions, attitudes and feelings of participants (Cohen & Manion, 2011; Gray, 2014).

Gray (2014) states that when analysing qualitative research data, there are a wide range of approaches that can organise data to form new connections and descriptions, including thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) introduce thematic analysis as a method that identifies and analyses patterns, understood as themes, capturing patterned meaning and similar responses identified within the dataset by the researcher. Joffe (2011) argues that utilising the method enables in-depth analysis, providing an essential foundation for the emergence of meanings uncovered within the apparent phenomena. Whilst the researcher recognises content analysis is a common approach for qualitative data analysis, it was ultimately not employed due to it being suited more towards existing visual and written texts (Gray, 2014). As this study analyses how Gen Z fashion students and industry workers navigate TikTok's content and their own identity perceptions whilst interacting with the app, reflexive thematic analysis was deemed the most suitable for this research (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clark (2022) state that reflexive thematic analysis as a fully qualitative approach is underpinned by the researcher acknowledging their values and first-hand experiences with the topic.

3.3 Research Approach

Within a chosen research approach, there are two different forms of reasoning that can be taken, such as inductive, deductive or the utilisation of both (Soiferman, 2010). Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) define the deductive approach as research that aims to test a hypothesis or theory to either contradict or add towards it, widely understood as a 'top down' form of research. With a deductive approach, the data collected would either prove the argument of the theory tested rightly or wrongly, focusing on any potential modifications and alterations (Lewis et al., 2009). According to Yuwono and Rachmawati (2023), the deductive reasoning approach seeks to develop the understanding of current theories, being less concerned with percentages of respondents and more interested in generalisability. Conversely, Creswell (2007) defines

the inductive approach as a ‘bottom up’ perspective, in which certain patterns arise from the data collected, working back and forth between the collated data until a collection of themes appear. Thus, within an inductive reasoning approach, the data collected informs and develops the theories that arise, being utilised most within qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Yuwono & Rachmawati, 2023).

Yuwono and Rachmawati (2023) explain that the combination of both deductive and inductive reasoning can develop a richer understanding of the concept or phenomena at hand. Patton (2002) for example, expresses that this can be done by asking both open-ended and closed-ended questions during an interview process. Whilst a deductive approach supplies a strong theory or framework to test, an inductive approach assists in original data collection, allowing for more comprehensive generalisations. This study aims to analyse how fashion is communicated and understood amongst Gen Z fashion students and industry workers, alongside the role and influence that TikTok has on both the decision-making process and one’s identity and adopts the inductive approach to identify emerging trends and patterns through analysis of participant responses (Yuwono & Rachmawati, 2023). Concurrently, this research seeks to test the continued relevance of Simmel’s (1957) dualistic theory within an online context, investigating whether a tension between individuality and trend following persists in the experiences of these participants. Therefore, this research also utilises a deductive approach as it tentatively draws conclusions regarding the relevance of Simmel’s dualistic notion, aiming to answer the hypothesis of whether it still maintains applicability.

3.4 Cross-Sectional Research Time Horizon

Gray (2014) explains that each research study has a given time-horizon, understood as the timescale in which the study will take place within. Gray (2014) further adds that the formation of a research time frame is contingent on the aim of the topic at hand, rather than just depending on the data gathering tool chosen. If the research study focuses on the short term, a specific period of time or analyses a certain phenomenon, a cross-sectional approach is most commonly utilised (Gray, 2014; Levin, 2006). Levin (2006) states that cross-sectional studies commonly have a purpose of finding a widespread presence of interests of a subgroup or specific population within a certain point in time. In turn, interviews with participants were conducted over a period

of two months between March and April. By doing this, the study captures a snapshot of practices at a particular moment to better understand the present situation of fashion engagement online and technological affordances utilised by the generational cohort. As the following section will explain, the identification of a generational group is purposeful based on an expected life stage or interest in the topics of fashion and TikTok, as this study offers new insights into how the cohort utilises and navigates social media at this current moment.

3.5 The Data Collection Process

This section of the methodology chapter discusses the sampling method utilised, the data collection process and lastly the choice of data analysis used. The chosen sampling method of purposive and homogenous sampling is firstly detailed, followed by the participant selection and recruitment process. The participants in focus being Generation Z fashion students and industry workers are next introduced, alongside the interview protocol which is next discussed. Lastly, the data collection process of semi structured one-on-one in-depth interviews is introduced in detail, alongside the process of recognising bracketing concludes the section.

3.5.1 Sampling and Participant Selection

Gray (2014) states that with qualitative research, informants are chosen as they enable exploration of an area highly relevant to the research topic, which is typically achieved through the use of purposive, non-probability sampling. As Maxwell (1997) explains, purposive samples are utilised when groups or individuals are identified and expected to provide crucial and valuable information that cannot be gained by other sampling designs. Furthermore, Gray (2014) argues that through purposive sampling, the researcher uses their judgement regarding which type of participants will provide key perspectives on the phenomenon by selecting those who have experienced it. As an essential aspect of phenomenological studies is that research participants have either experienced the phenomena at hand, purposive sampling was thus selected (Gray, 2014). As the research study is qualitative in nature, a smaller sample size of participants has been chosen on the basis that they will provide detailed and valuable firsthand responses useful to the researcher (Descatoires, 2017; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Gray, 2014). As noted by Gray (2014), phenomenological studies tend to favour

the utilisation of homogenous sampling, employing a smaller group of individuals that have mutual experiences and focusing on shared understandings identified through their answers in order to understand the phenomenon. Recognising this, the researcher identified potential participants as highly conscious Generation Z New Zealanders who use TikTok to engage with or post fashion content. Furthermore, this research study's sample focused on individuals who either currently study fashion or who work within the fashion industry in addition to being part of this generational cohort. Due to time pressures faced by the primary researcher, snowball sampling was additionally incorporated in which interviewees themselves identified and reached out to other potential participants for the study (Gray, 2014). As a key consideration, the researcher selected participants that shared certain characteristics to ensure feasibility and appropriateness. The researcher drew on the principle of transferability as introduced by Guba and Lincoln (1982), providing enough rich information of the lived experience to represent the population interviewed. As this study aims to analyse how TikTok influences the behaviours, fashion choices and identities of its users, interviewees were chosen on the basis of the shared attributes of either studying or working in fashion, being Generation Z, and being users of TikTok to engage with or produce fashion content.

Participants were ultimately selected due to the expectation they would possess a sufficient level of engagement with fashion, as a topic, and the social media platform TikTok. It was anticipated that through these criteria, they would share a long-term investment and a heightened interest for fashion in a contemporary setting. Whilst it can be recognised that this means these experiences lack generalisable value for the wider population, this increases the depth of insight and consideration for the chosen topics. This approach was deemed necessary for the practical considerations of the study such as scope and timeframe limitations. It was further anticipated that each of the participants engage in personal style experimentation as a hobby alongside their studies, with this specific group expected to be more likely to engage with fashion content on the app. A core assumption was that fashion students and industry workers are likely to engage with fashion experimentation and clothing purchases, whilst as members of the Gen Z demographic, they could also have strong spending power within the fashion market (Wang, 2021). The dataset gained from these participants will logically present rich findings due to the presumption that they hold a deeper level of

engagement with the topics of fashion and perhaps a reflective and critical lens for the subject.

All potential participants selected were between the age range of 20-26 years, encompassing the older cohort of Generation Z. Individuals within this age range were specifically chosen as whilst still being in their formative years, there is an expected peak of fashion consumption habits due to their deeper level of engagement and investment with the topic. Additionally, participants were chosen as frequent users of TikTok, whether they simply consume and/or produce content themselves. Generation Z participants were specifically chosen as the application has a strong hold on contemporary youth culture and is considered the demographic's domain (Stahl & Literat, 2022; Zeng et al., 2021). Furthermore, Gen Z participants were specifically selected due to both their ability to seamlessly blend their virtual and physical worlds for socialising, learning and working, having grown up as the first digital natives (Madden, 2019). Alongside this, young adults utilise social media as not only a hub for connectivity and social interaction, but additionally as a place for identity formation (Fu & Cook, 2020).

3.5.2 Recruitment Process

Once Ethics Approval was granted from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (Appendix A), the researcher sought participants through advertisement posters (Appendix Ba), placed within various locations of the Auckland University of Technology City Campus. The recruitment posters contained all relevant information on the study, including the researcher's contact information for interested participants to email. Moreover, the researcher asked AUT Fashion Design Faculty to create a general course announcement to students enrolled in fashion design regarding the research study on the platform Canvas. Additionally, the researcher spoke to third-year students regarding the study within the last five minutes of a studio class session.

Despite efforts, the primary researcher faced difficulties with gathering enough participants, to which the scope of the research was broadened to additionally focus on current industry workers. Whilst there could be a perceived contrast between students and industry professionals, the similarity of being within the older Generation Z cohort minimises distance. In addition to this, the inclusion of snowball sampling and the option for online interviews were added. In turn, a Recruitment Protocol (Appendix Bb) was created outlining two updated strategies. Strategy one focused on the

recruitment of industry workers and the possibility to identify potential interviewees through their publicly available information, with initial contact made directly by the primary researcher. Once the participant expressed interest, the primary researcher contacted the interviewee by email using a standard template (Appendix Bc). Strategy two allowed for existing contacts already familiar with the study to encourage others who meet the requirements to partake in the study, to which interested participants made direct contact with the primary researcher. Through these revised strategies, participants were successfully recruited. Participants were provided with a standard email reply (Appendix Bd), which included the AUTECH approved Participant Information Sheet (Appendix Be) and the Consent Form (Appendix Bf). Participants confirmed their interest and willingness to participate in the study by replying to the initial email with a signed Consent Form returned to the primary researcher. If potential participants did not provide a response within two weeks, a follow up email was sent, in which after it was assumed that they wished to no longer participate and no further contact was made. In preparation for if more individuals than needed expressed interest to participate, selection on a first come first serve basis would have been employed, encouraging fairness and equal opportunity.

Once willingness to partake was confirmed, the researcher communicated through email with potential participants to arrange an interview either within the premises of Auckland University of Technology's City Campus or their location of work. Prior to the interviews commencing, participants were each supplied their own physical copies of their signed Consent Forms and their Information Sheet.

3.5.3 Semi-Structured In-depth Interviews

Gray (2014) argues that one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews are considered the most relevant form of data collection for studies employing a phenomenological approach. Thus, semi-structured in-depth interviews were considered useful for this current study as the phenomena was revealed through discussions with participants living and experiencing it (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2014). By choosing semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to further probe participants to expand on their subjective answers (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2014). As probing encourages participants to expand on their opinions and viewpoints, the open-ended questions allowed exploration of their personal experiences such as how they navigate fashion on TikTok as highly fashion-conscious Gen Z users.

An interview protocol (Appendix Bg) was established by the researcher, detailing information regarding the recording, data processing and storage process. Due to the nature of semi-structured interviews, a number of open-ended questions were created, aiming to explore the understandings and experiences of each participant, aligning with a phenomenological research approach (Gray, 2014). The questions asked were general and broad, allowing participants to construct their own subjective understandings, typically developed through their own experiences (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2014). The questioning began from firstly asking participants how they personally understand fashion, to elaborating on their opinions of online fashion today, to how they perceive their own identity whilst using TikTok. Participants were also asked to detail their personal thoughts regarding individuality and following trends. By utilising open-ended questions and probing, this allowed for more enriching data as each participant was able to speak freely, leading the interview into unexpected territory. Through this, it was ensured that the data collection process was in-line with what is expected from semi-structured interviews.

One hour face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews were organised with six individual participants to both explore the shared experiences by the cohort and discover the underlying phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1989). The interviewer created a comfortable and trustworthy environment by either hosting the interviews either at the participant's location of study or their place of occupation. In addition to this, the interviewee's location of study or place of work was chosen due to the atmosphere allowing for a quiet and controlled environment, whilst also maintaining practicality and safety.

During the interview process, the researcher-maintained control of the interview direction whilst still keeping within the nature of semi-structured interviews, including occasional probing which was dependent on the participant's answers (Gray, 2014). The researcher to the best of their ability attempted to avoid leading questions, reflecting on their interview protocol questions as a reference point whenever deemed necessary. All interviewees proceeded smoothly with a conversational tone, with improvisation where it was deemed necessary being utilised due to the nature of semi-structured interviews (Gray, 2014). For example, if a participant mentioned 'microtrends' earlier than anticipated, the researcher then orientated questions around the topic of microtrends instead. Through open questions, occasional probing was further utilised by the researcher to gain specific examples from participants (Gray, 2014). For example,

if participants mentioned certain fashion trends that they favoured, the researcher further probed with questions such as '*What would be an example of something you would see?*'. Through probing, this encouraged participants to expand on their answers, allowing opportunity to further explore meanings and experiences ascribed by interviewees (Gray, 2014). With this, additional questions were prompted alongside the original questions outlined within the interview protocol.

In turn, the data collection process allowed both participants and the primary researcher to engage in critical self-reflection, as each interview encouraged deeper discussions around a topic of deep interest for all involved. Participants each engaged in critical discussion, describing in detail how they use TikTok, their subjective connection towards fashion and in turn, how they perceived their own fashion identities, others and the general 'state' of contemporary fashion today. The two most significant themes arose within the first few interviews conducted by the researcher; however, the researcher ultimately conducted three interviews with tertiary students and the remaining three with industry workers to ensure balance amongst responses. Once data saturation was reached, the primary researcher alongside their supervisor decided that further interviews were not deemed necessary to which the analysis process began.

3.5.4 Process of Bracketing

To ensure trustworthiness within this current study, the researcher drew from Descatoires (2017), who utilised Guba and Lincoln's (1982) strategic approach to manage reflection and ensure 'confirmability.' To acknowledge confirmability, the researcher implemented phenomenological bracketing, in which their own thoughts and personal experiences with the topic were acknowledged to ensure that their presuppositions did not sway the responses of the interviewees (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the entire research process, detailing their own experiences with the topic at hand including their own assumptions and expectations.

Introduced by Husserl (1931), bracketing is an exercise where researcher sets aside their own subjective experiences on the subject so that a new perspective can be revealed by participants in regard to the phenomena at hand (Creswell, 2007; Descatoires, 2017; Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). Gray (2014) argues that by engaging in bracketing, the researcher's own knowledge regarding the topic is removed to not interfere with participant data (Crotty, 1998). As complete separation is rarely

perfectly achieved (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), bracketing is sometimes embraced by researchers who begin the process by detailing their own first-hand experiences with the phenomena at hand. This is then followed by the researcher bracketing their views and opinions prior to analysing the personal narratives of their participants (Creswell, 2007). Whilst the primary researcher does not identify as a student studying fashion nor is a current industry worker, they are also part of the older Generation Z social group. In addition to this, the researcher consumes fashion content on the application with daily usage of the application through personal interest in the topic. Through this, the researcher recognises that these biases may shape the research process and bring potential bias as someone who is additionally impacted by fashion content on the application.

As this research implements reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher understands the significance of reflexivity whilst also recognising the importance of bracketing bias. Braun et al. (2022) explain that reflexivity is the process where a researcher critically reflects on their own assumptions, thoughts, values and what they expect, aiming a neutral and unbiased approach to analysis. Braun et al. (2022) further state that by implementing reflexivity, there is recognition that knowledge is impossible to be completely separated from the researcher's influence, with their thoughts and assumptions shaping the findings created. By recognising bracketing, the researcher was aware of their own proximity towards the phenomena, ensuring that the analysis and interpretation of the data is not excessively influenced by their existing knowledge and personal bias.

3.6 The Data Analysis Process

3.6.1 Transcription

The researcher used the auto transcription function of a video editing software to generate an initial transcript which was subsequently reviewed for accuracy. Once the data transcription process was complete, the document was formatted correctly and relistened to the audio, cross checked for final accuracy, and all transfer errors were amended (Schmidt, 2004). To maintain participant confidentiality, the researcher implemented pseudonyms for interviewees and removed any potential information that could identify the individuals involved (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2014). Despite the time-

consuming process with transcribing the data set verbatim, this allowed the researcher to become well familiarised with the data prior to commencing the thematic analysis process (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2014).

3.6.2 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Once the primary data was collected, the chosen method of thematic analysis was employed to analyse and interpret it. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” (p. 79). This research followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step framework of thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), firstly the researcher familiarises themselves with the data set, followed by creating codes, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing, defining and lastly, writing the final report. Clarke and Kitzinger (2004) for example suggest that the key themes found do not automatically need to be the ones that show up most frequently within the dataset, instead the authors suggest that the themes that capture the most key aspects related to the research question are considered the most valuable (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004). In recognising this, the data analysis approach was chosen due to the ability to organise the common experiences, individual behaviours and thoughts of participants through the creation of themes, allowing the underlying phenomena innate within participant responses to arise (Descatoires, 2017; Gray, 2014; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

In line with Braun and Clarke (2022), this research study employed a reflexive analysis approach, emphasising and valuing the researcher’s critical reflection and subjectivity to create meaning from the data. A reflexive approach was implemented as it was an important aspect for good quality analysis, with the primary researcher seeking to understand their own thoughts and perspectives on the topic at hand (Elliott et al., 1999). Employing reflexivity, the researcher reflected on their assumptions and actions throughout the research process (Wilkinson, 1988). The researcher located themselves and developed awareness of their own standpoints, perspectives and positionings as this undoubtedly shaped and informed the research (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Meaning was revealed through the data at both a latent level of underlying connotations and a semantic level, exploring surface level meanings attached by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In recognising a semantic approach, the researcher was able to explore the relevance of Simmel’s notion of dualism through examining the experiences and behaviours of fashion-conscious Gen Z New Zealanders at a more

explicit level to answer RQ4 and RQ5. Whilst at times utilising a semantic approach, this study predominantly focused on exploring meanings at a more latent level, analysing the implicit and deeper conceptual meanings made by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Drawing from Guba and Lincoln (1982) to ensure the principles of credibility, dependability and confirmability, the researcher practised reflexivity throughout the entire process ensuring quality control. In addition to this, the researcher kept a reflexive journal to critically reflect on their expectations and assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

The analysis process began with the researcher familiarising and immersing themselves with the data set, reading through each interview several times on different occasions, prior to the coding stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). By doing this, the researcher was able to draft initial codes or ideas from the outset (Gray, 2014), gaining a widespread view of the potential underlying phenomena and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Alongside this, the researcher added reflexive comments throughout each interview transcript. In turn, codes were then finalised to highlight whether initial findings were inductive and data driven or potentially theory driven, such as those that contributed to discussion of Simmel's dualistic theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With the complex nature of semi-structured interviews, both latent and semantic codes were identified simultaneously throughout the entire process. By engaging in multiple rounds of reviewing each interview transcript, this allowed for code comparison, redefinition and the collapsing of those deemed unnecessary (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, codes generated by the researcher such as 'consciousness with purchasing' and 'quality over quantity' were all generated within the first rounds of the initial coding process. Within later rounds of coding, these were then collapsed into the single code label 'awareness of consumption', which better encapsulated the wider idea. Furthermore, a number of initial codes created distinctly such as 'awareness of the algorithm' and 'influenced by 'For You' page content' were integrated instead within 'influenced by the algorithm' as it better summarised the concept.

After completing the coding process, initial themes were created by developing the collated codes into group clusters that shared wider patterns of meaning and varying focus (Braun et al., 2022). To do this, the researcher utilised an online based digital tool to manually construct a visual mind map in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) to clearly find overlaps and connections between clusters (Appendix C). With this, the coded clusters were grouped by the researcher interpreting different clear concepts that were considered meaningful to the research questions (Braun et al.,

2022). For example, codes that related to collectivism such as ‘microtrends’ and ‘trends feeling overdone’ were grouped under the theme of ‘trend following’ as they represent a similar overarching idea. Following this, the researcher revisited the coding process multiple times and began to refine and define the themes, creating clear subthemes for further clarification and merging themes when necessary. For example, the themes of ‘age’ and ‘consumption’ became integrated into ‘social awareness’, which was then redefined into ‘critical and social awareness’. The entire data analysis process was completed by the primary researcher manually.

Overall, six key themes were identified by the researcher which assisted in capturing patterns of shared meaning from participants, depicting the interpreted ideas over the dataset (Braun et al., 2022). The generated themes aid with deeper interpretation and understanding of the lived experiences and patterned meanings created by the cohort of participants.

3.7 Summary

Altogether, this chapter detailed the research process and design that guided this study. The chosen research philosophy, theoretical perspective taken and the chosen qualitative forms of data collection and analysis were explained in depth with clear reasoning. Due to the nature and aims of the current study, constructivism was chosen as the research philosophy despite acknowledging social constructionism and its relevance. The researcher utilised interpretive phenomenological research through the application of semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing for authentic conversations with interviewees and deepening understanding of the participant’s lived experiences. In turn, the adoption of reflexive thematic analysis enabled the researcher to find patterned meanings amongst the responses of each participant, assisting in the development of key themes. In turn, the subsequent chapter will thoroughly explore the initial four themes which analyse the understandings and first-hand experiences of highly fashion-conscious Gen Z users of the app, alongside further comprehending TikTok’s role, impacts and influence on this cohort.

Chapter Four: Fashion, Identity and Influence in Contemporary Society

4.1 Introduction

This chapter details part of the findings of this current study gathered through conducting six semi-structured interviews with participants who are highly involved with the topic at hand. By conducting reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), the researcher was able to sort the interview data extracts into codes and authentically develop themes that capture common connections. Overall, the themes presented in this chapter address part of the research problem which seeks to analyse how the application TikTok influences the identities, behaviours and the dress choices of highly fashion-conscious Gen Z users. Furthermore, this research explores the relevance of Simmel's fashion dualistic theory within the context of TikTok and in turn, how this dynamic is navigated and experienced by this cohort. This aspect of the research problem will be analysed in detail in Chapter Five.

4.2 Themes Developed

Overall, six themes were developed from the interview data: interpreting fashion, the complexity of influence, critical and social awareness, digital representation and connection, individuality and trend following. Taken together, the themes developed by the researcher seek to answer each of the five research questions in logical sequential order rather than discussing from largest to smallest. The first theme 'interpreting fashion' analyses all present knowledge of how participants interpret fashion such as its meaning, fashion as a form of communication and their observations of the contemporary industry through lived experience. Secondly, 'complexity of influence' explores how participants are susceptible yet discerning of the impact of influence from external perceptions, content creators on TikTok and the algorithm itself. 'Critical and social awareness' explores the consciousness that participants have of their own selves relating to their consumption habits and values. 'Digital representation and connection' analyse the varying attitudes towards TikTok content the participants consumed and the application itself, exploring the dissonant nature of connection and identity representation towards content engaged with on the application. Lastly, the themes of

‘individuality’ and ‘trend following’ are analysed through the lens of Simmel’s (1957) dualistic fashion theory. The themes explore the theory’s relevance within a contemporary context, additionally analysing how both individuality and trend following are navigated by participants and in turn, exploring the wider broader patterns apparent.

4.2.1 Outline of Themes

Theme one, ‘interpreting fashion’, analyses the similarities and variations within participant answers of how they comprehend fashion, its symbolic meaning, fashion as a form of communication and their opinions on the modern-day fashion environment. Subsequently, theme two explores the complexities of influence and the varied forms it comes in, such as external perceptions, following others and the algorithm itself. Theme three explores each participants’ critical perceptions and awareness of their internal personal fashion consumption habits and values which adapt with age. Theme four explores how participants as users interact with the applications’ functions, including how they engage with TikTok content. The theme additionally dissects the nuanced types of connection participants feel towards TikTok and its content, including the varied feelings expressed towards identity representation on the application. Similarities and differences within participant responses are explored, including the varying feelings expressed relating to the application itself. Lastly, themes five and six will be explored in detail within Chapter five, focusing on the relevance of Simmel’s (1957) dualistic fashion theory through analysing participants’ answers and lived experiences.

Table 4.2.1 Summarised Themes

Theme	Open Code	Code Description
Interpreting Fashion	Fashion’s Meaning	How participants interpret and comprehend fashion through shared and subjective experiences.
	Fashion as Communication	Participants’ perceptions of how fashion is a form of communicating values of the wearer within a social world.

	The “State” of Fashion Today	Participants’ perceptions and interpretations of the nature of the fashion industry today at an industry level.
The Complexity of Influence	From Others’ Perceptions	The complex role that being perceived within a social context plays within participants’ fashion choices.
	From Influencers and Content Creators	The nuanced feelings and preferences participants hold towards being influenced by people followed on TikTok.
	From the Algorithm	The complex feelings participants have towards being influenced by the TikTok algorithm.
Critical and Social Awareness	Of Consumption	Participants’ conscious awareness of their consumption habits in relation to their fashion purchases, showcasing concern for the environment.
	Of Values with Age	Participants’ awareness of personal values and self-concept increases with age.
Digital Representation and Connection	Nuanced Connection Towards TikTok Content	The complex feelings participants have towards TikTok content consumed and the application as a whole.

	Identity Representation on TikTok is Nuanced	The nuanced feelings towards TikTok content in relation to digital identity and fashion self-representation.
Individuality	Valuing Individuality	The role that unique personal identity expression plays within participants' self-identities.
	Conscious Effort to be Unique	The conscious role that being viewed as unique plays within participants' social identities.
Trend Following	Trend Following is Nuanced	The nuanced feelings participants have towards following trends and dressing for social conformity.
	Sense of "Sameness" Within Fashion Today	The conformist and 'basic' nature of trend following that participants see within everyday fashion.

The discussed findings constitute the researcher's analytical interpretation of the data set, grounded through the use of quoted or paraphrased interview excerpts from the participants' answers. Each of the six participants have been given pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity, with longer excerpts shortened to eliminate unnecessary data. As three of the participants are current fashion students and the remaining three are industry professionals, this is detailed in the below table for reference.

Table 4.2.2 Participant Information

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Occupation
Bella	22	Fashion student
Glenn	23	
Dawn	22	
Gia	26	Industry professional
Naomi	26	
Poppy	26	

4.3 Interpreting Fashion

4.3.1 Fashion’s Meaning

All participants were asked questions regarding how they interpreted fashion, with each making meaning of the topic subjectively. In turn, both commonalities and differences were found within their answers. For example, interviewees were asked what aspects of their lives influenced their interpretations of fashions' meaning, with differences found in how they ascribed meaning based on their present life stage, irrespective of being part of the same generational cohort. Participants that were current tertiary students associated fashions' meaning with learning and practicality, emphasising traits of freethinking and openness. For example, Glenn commented that studying fashion “has opened up my mind. I guess definitely on the practical side [...] but also, the theoretical side which we learn a lot from throughout my degree from, which is stuff you never think about”. Participant Dawn added that studying the topic has impacted her own interpretation, adding “these days I look at a lot about proportion and silhouettes [...] I think studying it has definitely allowed me more understanding [...] and it’s definitely changed how I talk about it and how I see it on other people as well”.

Whereas for industry connected participants, meaning was made through understanding on an operational level how fashion diffuses (Kawamura, 2005), with emphasis made on adjusting and falling into place within the industry as current workers. Participant Naomi for example recognised how working within the industry has influenced her interpretation, adding “I guess it’s shown me how much work, care and research goes behind every single design [...] coming here, I feel like it’s really educated me on how a place like [Brand] just replicates original work”. Poppy expressed a similar sentiment of how working in the industry impacts how she interprets fashion, adding “it’s given me more knowledge of brands that I probably hadn’t heard of [...] and kind of giving them a platform to showcase their stuff, rather than just your generic high street brands”. Interestingly, industry professionals shared similar forms of criticism, with participants such as Gia feeling ‘jaded’ by the industry, and Poppy noting how she feels pressure to stay ahead of trends and to prove she is ‘worthy’ of working in the field. Poppy further noted feeling these pressures most whilst representing her workplace at events and as a fashion creator herself. This suggests that with fashion meaning making, there are two distinct engagements with the topic rooted in different life experiences and stages, despite being within the same age demographic.

Subjectively, participants also recognised that their interpretations of fashion and its meaning were shaped by their own lived experiences and connections. For example, participant Naomi described fashion as “dressing how you want to dress [...] everyone has their own idea of fashion, and I think it’s based on what they like and what their taste is”. Participants additionally alluded towards the relationship between fashion as a correspondent of one’s identity (Jenkins, 2014). Gia commented “I use it as a form of self-expression, and creativity. And to me, it’s something that I can do every day that is creative. And my love for it has also come from my mum. So, there’s also that familial bond about it”. Glenn shares this notion of familial connection, adding “I grew up around fashion [...] And it’s sort of always has been my other half, it’s part of me. [...] Fashion to me is a lot more than just the clothes on my body, it’s my identity. It’s sort of my soul”. On a more personal level, interviewees highly conscious engagers users were aware of fashions’ communicative potential, expressing that it is a strong part of their own self-concepts, emphasising its use as a tool for expressing their values and identity to others.

4.3.2 Fashion as Communication

With participants having discussed their personal interpretations of dress, a common theme across the interviews was a general awareness of fashion being a tool for communication, identifying how one's choice of dress sends a message and positions one's self-identity to those around them socially (Barnard, 1996; Bukantaitė & Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė, 2024). For example, Gia commented that “people are always using clothing to communicate who they are or their ideas [...] I tend to want to be different. And so, I'll wear things that I think make me a little bit different from the rest.”. Furthermore, participants such as Glenn and Dawn recognised how fashion operates socially, both alluding to the act of being able to “sort of judge” what someone wears. For example, Glenn mentioned how one can “tell a lot about a person by just how they dress”, reinforced by Dawn in terms of gaining both positive and negative insights about the wearer through their choice of dress. Participants expressed how ones' dress is an important aspect within one's identity, recognising how fashion is symbolic and holds the ability to communicate deeper meanings and information about the wearer (Barnard, 2010; Kawamura, 2005). This additionally aligns with the theory of symbolic interactionism, as the way in which one presents themselves transfers deeper meanings to those around them that are learned from ones' cultural environment (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Mead, 1934), such as feelings of judgement of ones' fashion sense with a glance as expressed by participants. This indicates that for this specific cohort, judgements and assumptions of others are actively made based only on their fashion sense whether positive or negative, with participants consciously aware of this thought process.

Underpinned by a critical awareness towards others, participants understood how fashion plays a key role in how they present themselves socially (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990). All participants shared the sentiment that ‘coolness’ was a goal with their fashion sense, with Gia for example noting “there's that aspect of coolness, and I again, this is kind of lame to admit, but I want to look cool to other people who I think are cool”. Poppy extends this sentiment, adding “I want to be known as; ‘Oh my god, Poppy dresses so cool’ [...] I just get a little bit of a buzz out of it when people like what I wear”. Georgiou (2017) suggested that one's self-concept is linked to the social world and thus performance. Unsurprisingly, these findings propose that for participants, being seen as ‘cool’ by others socially is a high driver for their own fashion choices. However,

meaning is found as aspiring for 'coolness' as noted by participants showcases how one's social identity is inherently a performance, with 'coolness' used both as a social signal to others and as a form of aspiration.

In turn, the shared sentiment of strategic self-presentation and performativity shared by participants informed how they made sense of their personal TikTok feeds and the content they engaged with posted by other creators. As Gillespie (2014) suggested, online platforms offer further noticeability through encouragement of user generated content. Participants expressed that the online world such as TikTok encourages higher levels of self-presentation and strategic performativity.

Yeah, I think that social media [...] it heightens trends and the performance part way more. Because everyone's trying to look cool, you know [Laughs]. Cooler than what they are, better than what they are, richer than what they are. [Gia]

Bella shares a similar critique, adding that due to the application's nature of encouraging user posting, there is an increased focus on lifestyle content, noting: "People see that and think, 'Oh I want to live this kind of life' or 'I want to be this kind of person' or 'This sort of girl'". Interestingly, Hernández-Serrano et al. (2022) suggested through their study on Spanish teenage TikTok and Instagram users that self-presentations on these apps were not guided by social opinion and approval, however, were instead influenced by authenticity and staying true to oneself. However, the findings of this study make a similar observation to Choi et al. (2020), arguing that permanent posting on social media applications in compositions to short lived stories features were linked to strategic self-presentations and performativity. Interestingly, these findings suggest that users may be critical of the performative nature showcased by others on TikTok attempting to appear 'cool'; however, users themselves expressed that 'coolness' is something they sought to achieve.

These discussions of performativity and self-presentation resulted in participants commenting on the topic of authenticity within the contemporary online fashion world. All interviewees expressed a preference for authenticity, commenting that whilst engaging with fashion content posted from others on TikTok, performativity can be clearly evident. For example, Bella is critical, mentioning that people care more about their outward appearances: "Most of the time now it's not really coming [...] from an authentic place such as 'Oh, this is what I like, or this is what I like doing'. Now it's

more of; 'How do I want people to be to see me as? [...] How do I want people to perceive me? Do they want to see me as someone esoteric, or do they want to see me as edgy?'" . Gia extends this critique, adding that 'full' authenticity whilst posting online is impossible and even nuanced, commenting "I think it would be a lie to say you're fully authentic on the internet, cause at the end of the day, you're always posting something for it to be viewed by other people. The minute you click record, it's like you're already performing and it's a show [...] I don't think it's fully bad, it's both good and bad". These findings reinforce the notion that how one presents themselves online is an act of performance, through acting in manners that carry certain messages to signify to other users on the platform (Georgiou, 2017). Participants thus critically expressed that the nature of fashion content posted by other people on TikTok was highly performative, which in turn decreased beliefs of authentic self-presentations on the app.

These conversations regarding authenticity naturally followed with participants discussing its relevance relating back to themselves, with interviewees noting that the very nature of posting on the application for other's view makes authenticity harder to achieve. Gia for example commented that as a creator herself on the app, authenticity is something she is consciously aware of particularly whilst posting 'Outfit of the day' videos, adding "sometimes I'll be like; 'Oh, have I just worn this thing so that I can post it?'. Like today, I probably wore this because I was hoping to do an OOTD later you know. I thought, 'Oh, it's a little bit different, I've never worn this outfit before' [...] there have been times where I put something on and [...] I post it and I'm like; 'Delete that". Naomi shares a similar sentiment of being a creator making her more aware of her fashion sense and critical of her own posting, adding that "If I don't think that my outfit is as good as it is normally or I don't feel as confident as I normally would do, I wouldn't share it online". Gia further questioned the nature of full authenticity online, cynically commenting "Is there ever authenticity? Cause we're always trying to say something [...] Like who am I trying to portray now, today? Is this my authentic self? No [...] I don't think we can ever be fully authentic on the internet". Despite criticisms of the increased nature of inauthenticity of other users on TikTok, participants recognised this notion is additionally applicable to themselves as well, expressing the viewpoint that nothing posted online is inherently authentic.

4.3.3 The “State” of Fashion Today

With the differing and similar ways in which participants made meaning of fashion, its symbolic nature and how it can communicate to others, these aspects shaped the way in which interviewees understood and made sense of the general environment today. In turn, the researcher referred to this as how participants viewed the “state” of the contemporary fashion world. All interviewees recognised or introduced the topic of ‘microtrends’, understanding their nature as accelerated niche online fashion trends (Reilly & Hawley, 2019), and in turn their continued existence showcasing a ‘top down’ state of fashion today. Glenn for example commented that microtrends “stem from people who are higher up such as celebrities or a creator starting a trend and then everyone latches onto that and it kind of trickles down”. Gia shared a similar sentiment, adding “I think all microtrends ultimately come from someone cool doing it and everyone's trying to be cool. So, everyone does it. And then they become trendy”. Through this shared notion, participants expressed that by the continued prevalence of microtrends evident online, the modern fashion industry is suggested by participants to be still predominantly top down in nature. Naomi further expresses that microtrends and fashion trends still originate from brands, however, notes that “social media makes it feel like it isn't, and it's bottom up”. Interestingly, Muturi (2024) suggested that the nature of social media platforms such as TikTok have democratised the fashion world, by providing users unlimited access to content. However, these findings suggest that through the continued relevance and proliferation of microtrends, participants interpret the nature of fashion today as still ‘top down’ (Kawamura, 2005; Simmel, 1957). Furthermore, this is reinforced as despite the appearance of a ‘bottom up’ effect that social media portrays, participants noted that fashion leaders and brands on the application continue to influence fashion today. Aligning partly with the top-down models of fashion diffusion (Kawamura, 2005; Sproles, 1981), these findings suggest that trends originate from individuals or brands who followers find admirable or connect with, rather than originating from upper class individuals. In turn, these findings suggest that Simmel's (1957) idea of class distinction is outdated, as followers today admire specific individuals with influence rather than simply following the upper class. The findings of this study make a similar observation to Newholm and Hopkinson (2009) who suggested that Simmel's notion of class distinction was outdated. Therefore, through the continued proliferation of microtrends, participants interpreted the current state of fashion today as still predominantly top down in nature. In addition to this, participants

interpreted that microtrends originate from certain brands or influential creators, despite the appearance of a bottom-up effect perpetuated on social media.

Additionally, alongside discussions of microtrends and how participants interpreted the state of the contemporary fashion world, interviewees simultaneously expressed that long run fashion cycles are still relevant. Poppy for example expressed that the continued underlying long-run fashion cycle amongst microtrends is 'refreshing', adding "it's quite nice when for example, 90s trends come back in, and you know that there's always going to be a cycle". Participants further interpreted the nature of online fashion trends continue to change in extremes (Miller et al., 1993). With new trends circulating being the extreme opposite in nature of what preceded, fashion trends today were still considered by participants to switch at an accelerated pace (Bauman, 2013; Carlotto, 2018). Participants for example collectively commented on a recent sudden change from maximalism to now minimalist fashion due to microtrends. For example, Dawn discussed the past maximalist microtrend of [Brand]'s moon boots to discuss the subsequent rapid shift towards minimalism, stating "It's almost a little bit all over the place [...] And then switching to ballet flats [...] all of a sudden it's very minimal with the rise of ballet flats and now the kitten heel". Gia expressed a similar sentiment of fashion returning to minimalism, commenting "We've kind of swung the pendulum back into there you know. I feel when TikTok was really at its peak in terms of fashion, it was very maximalist [...] So it's very interesting that the pendulum has swung to the opposite". Collectively, participants criticised the ever-quickening state of fashion, noting the 'sudden' extreme shifts from maximalism towards minimalism and the lack of trend longevity. Furthermore, this may suggest a wider trend of the Generation Zers favouring slower fashion, with a negative sentiment shared about the excessiveness of fast fashion and microtrends online today.

In turn, the discussion of fashions' quickening nature revealed differing opinions on the current state of microtrends on TikTok from participants, showcasing its nuanced nature. A number of participants felt the nature of fast fashion today was still quickening in pace (Bauman, 2013; Jenß, 2013) through the continued adoption of microtrends. Poppy for example expressed concern, commenting that "I definitely think microtrends get faster by the minute. I just think that microtrends are the fastest they've ever been. It's crazy and scary". Glenn expressed a similar idea, further adding "It's just very different all the time and there's no longevity behind it. So, everything's just the same

and everything that pops up is a trend. And then in the next six months or the next year, everyone forgets about it and it's on to the next thing". Interestingly, Naomi added that due to the personalised nature of her 'For You' page, she felt that fashion cycles and adoption were slowing down in nature, however noted "my whole 'For You' page is very niche to myself now. I only follow people whose style is something I'd like to replicate [...] So it feels like it's slowing down...but I don't necessarily think it is". With this, these findings suggest that some participants interpreted the general nature of microtrends today to be quicker than ever before, expressing concern with their continued amplification.

Conversely, some interviewees expressed that microtrends were less prominent online today, commenting on a wider shift of slowing fashion consumption patterns instead. Dawn for example expressed "I think it has kind of changed, just in that sense of being a bit more progressive or a bit more aware of what is happening in the fashion industry. Considering a few years ago, it was big on [Brand] and stuff [...] But now there is a big light on slowing down what you're buying". Gia further adds a similar notion of microtrends having reached a peak during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of user 'boredom', further commenting "I think microtrends aren't as big as before [...] So I do see them pop up, but I don't think it's that big anymore. Or maybe they just look different...but I definitely think it's less than what it was". In turn, these findings suggest that participants' interpretations on the state of microtrends differs, as some interviewees noticed an amplification of microtrend content whilst some noted of their decline, suggesting both realities to be simultaneously plausible.

4.4 The Complexity of Influence

4.4.1 From Others' Perceptions

Following the ways in which participants interpreted fashion, a persistent theme of discussion was complex role that influence from external perceptions plays in the dress choices of others and in turn, how it impacts their own fashion sense. A large point of participant discussion focused on how what one wears influences how they are perceived by those around them. Interestingly, participants firstly discussed the notion of being swayed from external perceptions with 'others' in mind. Whilst discussing others, participants most commonly referred to practical dressers not involved within

the world of fashion, in which the researcher refers to in this study as 'lower level' fashion engagers. With this, participants commented that most other lower-level fashion engagers cared about external perceptions and validation, with only a small fraction not caring. Glenn observes that most other people 'latch on' to trends to "be seen in a certain way or even just as a way to fit in", noting that a small fraction of people who do not follow trends are their own 'person', ascribing less personhood towards imitators. Similarly, Bella comments that despite not affecting everyone, a large influence for other lower-level engagers and their choice of dress is consciousness of how they want to be 'seen' by others, with Dawn adding that one's social surroundings may pressure them to conform. With this, two behaviours were identified with other people, one aligned with caring about external opinions for social approval and affirmation (Bauman, 1991; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009) and the other which rejects external perceptions. With this, the findings suggest that participants ascribe positive and favourable connotations towards others that choose not to follow trends, further implying that those who choose not to 'fit in' are viewed as more whole and embodied people. Therefore, participants held critical views towards other lower-level fashion engagers, expressing that most others care about fitting into the in-group (Trepte, 2006), feeling included and negatively 'latching on' to external perceptions. With this, participants believed that only an exceptional number of low-level fashion engagers were their own embodied selves, who were in turn viewed more favourably by the cohort.

In addition to the critical observations participants made of others, interviewees in turn were asked whether they themselves as higher level fashion engagers were influenced by the perceptions of others. All participants mentioned a similar notion of wanting to be 'perceived' by others a certain way, with a range of mixed responses. For some participants, external perceptions from others rarely mattered. For example, Glenn expressed that he never felt influenced by others' perceptions to dress a certain way as he noted that coolness is achieved through self-assurance, adding "I've always grown up very sure of myself and confident". Similarly, Poppy extended this notion of self-assurance with her style, adding "I've always dressed how I want. Even when I was at school. I was a bit nervous [...] but at the end of the day I think people admired it". In turn, these findings suggest that for some participants, the confidence they have in their dress choices in turn affects their own self-concept views, perceiving themselves as embodied people that dismiss the perceptions from other people.

Conversely, participants such as Gia commented that the perceptions and opinions of certain people within their fashion in-group do motivate their own fashion choices:

Other's perceptions definitely do, I'm not going to say I'm immune to that. Again, I want to look cool to the people that I think are cool. I'm not saying that everyone's perception of me affects how I dress, but definitely the opinions of the people who matter most to me, affects me the most. [Gia]

Gia furthered this sentiment, expressing how she respects the opinions and perceptions of others within the fashion community that she is a part of, adding that she “cares a lot less” about what other people think regarding her own dress choices. This notion reflects the theory of social identity through fashion in and out grouping (Hitlin, 2003; Hogg, 2016; Tajfel 1978; Trepte, 2006). For Gia, only the perceptions of certain others within her fashion in-group which she identifies as ‘cool’ inspire her dress choices rather than the opinions of many. This suggests that for some participants, the perceptions of people within their fashion out-group were held at a lower regard than those within their fashion in-group, whose opinions were held higher and even influenced their dress choices.

Interestingly, a number of participants expressed that being perceived as ‘cool’ by other people drives their own fashion choices and in turn, the certain brands they choose to buy. Naomi for example commented that being perceived as ‘cool’ by others does impact her own fashion choices, adding that she is conscious of the brands she wears to avoid judgement from others:

Even if I like something from [Brand], I wouldn't wear it for the fear of someone at an event or someone in the office being like, ‘Oh my God, I love that top where's it from?’ [...] you want to say something cool. [Naomi]

Poppy extends this notion of paying attention to brands worn through identifying others as certain ‘brand girl’ archetypes, stating “I think a lot of girls fall into the space of dressing like a [Brand] girl”. This notion is further expressed by Poppy categorising others into different groups of brands, adding “younger people go for [Brand] and [Brand] whereas slightly older...it's a [Brand] uniform”. Interestingly, this reinforces the theory of symbolic interactionism, as particular labels hold different connotations within a wider social setting, with certain fashion brands communicating deeper symbolic

meanings culturally (Kaiser et al., 1991; Kawamura, 2005). Through actively avoiding and preferring specific brands over others as exhibited by some participants, these meanings created are learned only through interacting socially (Barnard, 2018; Kaiser et al., 2018). With this, some participants avoided specific brands as a result of their symbolic meanings within a wider social context. This further suggests that for some interviewees, the meanings attached to certain brands are considered unsuited or conflicting to the self-identities they wish to exhibit to others, and in turn are not worn to avoid social judgement.

4.4.2 From Influencers and Content Creators

Alongside the role that external perceptions from other people have on participants, the complexities of influence through the form of online TikTok content was a discussion point for interviewees. A number of participants expressed positive opinions about being influenced by certain content creators and influencers on their TikTok feeds. Some participants found strong merit in being influenced by creators through the form of gaining fashion inspiration:

I also use it as inspiration. There are people out there and it's cool to see how they style things and that's something that I'm trying to experiment more with. And also seeing what the cool girlies are up to because, again, I ultimately want to be cool. [Gia]

In similar fashion, Dawn positively comments that content creators on TikTok occasionally showcase new items and brands, stating “sometimes I get a TikTok of someone showing a new shoe or something and I’m thinking ‘Oh, that's really cool’”. Bella extends this notion, commenting that she “loves” viewing other creators and sourcing styling inspiration, further adding “I have a piece [...], it's an [Brand] long sleeve. And I'm just like; ‘How do I wear this? [...] Which I go on TikTok for. I don't think it's a bad thing that you're looking at people online, I think that's the main purpose for it”. These findings are similar to that of De Perthuis and Findlay (2019), who suggested that influencers are not as negatively disruptive as one may think, as participants expressed positive notions of influence from specific content creators and influencers on the app. Therefore, the findings reveal that some participants found positive influence from certain content creators through the form of brand and product discovery, styling and general fashion inspiration.

In addition to discussions of influence through the form of styling inspiration and exposure to fashion goods, participants found merit through getting educated by creators and information learned on the app. Glenn for example states “One thing that I’ve always loved is being informed about new things. So, most of the fashion people I follow...they post stuff to teach”. Glenn differentiates educational content forms he engages with such as video essays or step-by-step tutorials on the app, comparing them to videos that are simply selling products, noting “One video could be about how to get a certain stitch on your denim instead of; “You know what trends I like?” you know. There’s a difference”. Sharing a similar sentiment, Gia notes how she uses TikTok to listen to knowledgeable fashion creators for the purpose of education by engaging in watching video essays, noting “On TikTok I try to be intellectual and listen to all the intellectual people talking about fashion”. These findings propose that different forms of content from creators on TikTok are considered influential for some participants, with videos that are educational in nature being actively differentiated from content posted promoting purchasing.

A common pattern apparent amongst participants was the recognition of how they were subject to being influenced through consuming influencers content, however, were critical of the compulsion to buy or spend. Several participants expressed mixed emotions of hesitancy and critique whilst discussing the topic of being influenced by creators to purchase fashion items. Bella for example notes how she tries to not let the application affect her fashion sense, critically commenting on the applications’ strong ability to influence:

It's that question of; ‘Do I really like this? Or am I just seeing it on TikTok? [...] I feel I have to come on to TikTok with a conscious and clear mind and say to myself that I'm not going to be influenced to buy a thing because I'm definitely not immune. [Bella]

Through Bella expressing she is not ‘immune’ to influence, this suggests a critical engagement apparent and recognition of how as users, one can be both actively discern and be susceptible to being influenced by creators on TikTok. However, this influence is often not translated into actual purchases. Participants such as Gia express that whilst creators providing fashion inspiration and how she actively purchases similar items to what is worn, she states “I’ll see things that I want, but I won’t go out and buy it”. Some participants such as Poppy express that TikTok has an influence despite going

on 'spending bans', adding "There's definitely influencer purchases 100%". This indicates that participants acknowledge their susceptibility to influence from specific content creators on the app, however, try to exert control on how they act on it.

Many participants negatively criticised the role and influence of specific fashion creators on the app, as discerning the relatability and likeability of the influencer plays a significant role in their purchasing behaviour. Gia mentions that it is difficult to relate to some influencers on the application who consistently display newly bought or gifted items, stating: "I think it becomes quite obvious when someone doesn't actually like the thing they are trying to sell. So, they kind of lose me at that". For participant Naomi, positive reactions arise when she is introduced to a new "cute top", however negative emotions appear when it is a fashion piece she cannot attain or afford, adding "Influencers lifestyles in particular are so different to a normal working person has a regular 9 to 5 job. So those elements feel negative". In line with the findings of Williams et al. (2024) focusing on beauty influencers, participants favoured creators whose fashion was deemed more authentic, achievable and easier to reference through the form of fashion 'inspo'. Therefore, this may suggest that participants are critically discerning of the creator content they view on their feeds, with achievability and relatability playing a significant role in their susceptibility to being influenced.

Some participants expressed that they are selective of the content creators they are influenced by, showcasing a high level of discernment and active awareness of the content they consume. For example, Gia commented:

It depends on the person and their thing. So, if I want to emulate that person and their coolness and chicness, I'll be like; 'Yes, I would love to be associated with you'. But if it was someone I didn't like and they're wearing something I like, I'd be like; 'Ew, maybe I was wrong'.

Naomi adds to this notion of being influenced by certain content creators she admires and follows, commenting "I follow a lot of people that are amazing at styling and make pieces look so different, and that makes me want to be like that". SanMiguel et al. (2018) suggested that whilst millennial users find fashion inspiration from their close circles, they still gain confidence in their fashion decisions from influencers and use them as a reference point. In turn, these findings suggest that participants choose which

influencers they are susceptible to being influenced by on the app, only affected if the content creator aligns with their personal style or if they specifically follow them.

Some participants discussed influence through the discussion of 'haul' videos, a popular video format in which creators discuss and present a collection of recently purchased or gifted items. Some participants expressed how influence from haul videos depends on the content creator and the specific items they showcase. Naomi for example states "If it's this niche, cool TikToker that does a haul I'm like; 'This is so cool'. Like; 'This is inspiration'". With this, this suggests that participants critically engage with influencer content on the app, as being audience members, they choose when to either be susceptible to certain content or allow it if it is deemed relatable, whilst also actively rejecting messaging (Hall, 1993) from certain content. These findings suggest that participants discern when content creators are and are not relevant to them, showcasing that they are both susceptible and critically aware of influence. Furthermore, factors such as achievability, relatability, relevancy and inspiration play a large role when they choose to be swayed. Therefore, this may suggest a wider pattern of users being susceptible to certain influence, however this influence is not universal as users are selective with what qualities and traits resonate with them, as seemingly inauthentic content is actively rejected.

With this, all participants expressed a preference for specific niche influencers, who were considered more aligned with their personal style, interests and bear the qualities they search for. A number of participants referred to these niche influencers as 'micro-influencers', understood as content creators with a small following base (Kay et al., 2020). Naomi commented that she has built her following tab of specific fashion content creators, stating "I like watching what I want to watch", choosing specifically micro-influencers that resonate with her sense of style. For Bella, micro-influencers are influential in terms of sourcing indirect styling 'inspo', stating "Like this jacket I'm wearing is not from just my brain myself. I saw someone wear it and I thought; 'Okay, I'll try that out!'", Extending this notion, Gia adds that micro-influencers 'feel' more authentic and in turn have a higher level of 'relatability' due to their smaller follower base even if they are not. Gia further comments "sometimes I find them cooler because the bigger you get the more you need to keep your bread up, so you have to appease the algorithm more. But with smaller ones they're just giving it a go". These findings partly align with Hammond (2023) who found that perceptions of favourability and trust were

highest with micro-influencers followed rather than macro-influencers, impacting participants' willingness to be influenced by the fashion content viewed. By expressing that larger influencers keep their 'bread up', this suggests that participants perceive influencers with larger follower bases as less trustworthy in comparison to smaller creators, believing that larger influencers strategise their content to garner engagement and reach.

4.4.3 From the Algorithm

On a similar line to influence from other creators on the app, participants additionally held nuanced views towards being influenced by what content is fed to them, specifically by the applications' highly personalised algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Some participants expressed positive viewpoints towards being influenced by the fashion content fed to them by the algorithm. Poppy for example commented that TikTok does affect her in 'some shape or form', mentioning that it is nice for "fresh inspo" with wearing current pieces she owns. Naomi added to this, stating "it's opened up a whole world of brands and ways of styling clothes that I wouldn't have thought of myself. Which is really cool, and I'd consider that inspiration". Alongside the algorithm influencing participants positively through the form of styling inspiration and brands, participants additionally expressed how their 'For You' page recommends 'cool' creators for them to follow. For example, Poppy expressed fondness of the algorithm's capability to showcase new creators, adding "it's nice when my 'For You' page recommends someone else I'm like 'Ooo they are cool' and I'll follow". In line with the findings of Bhandari and Bimo (2022), the algorithm confronts its users with increasingly more personalised content that relates to their own interests the more mental energy is put into their feed curation. These findings suggest that participants are highly aware of how they are susceptible to influence from the algorithm through fashion inspiration and finding new brands and creators, positively accepting this influence as the content is in-line with their own interests.

With this active awareness of the algorithm expressed by participants, a majority of interviewees additionally held nuanced positioning towards being influenced by the algorithm. For example, participant Dawn recognises that she mainly sees fashion content through solely engaging with "whatever the 'For You' page is showing me". Other participants, such as Bella, mention that the algorithm 'sometimes' influences her, explaining "For me, if I want something and I see it on TikTok, I'm like; 'I need to

get this' and it reinforces that more. But it's not for everything". For Gia, she is critically aware with her own usage habits, recognising the negative aspects of only being influenced by the fashion content on her 'For You' page:

I engage most with the 'For You' page mainly. I don't search unless there's a specific product that piqued my interest and I'll click the little search tab. But I don't seek out...people, which probably might be not that great. So, I'm just accepting what is fed to me but, I mainly just rely on my 'For You' page. [Gia]

Ultimately, participants held nuanced views and high awareness in regard to the repetitive nature of the algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Awareness of the algorithm reinforces participants as active online users, who are simultaneously susceptible and critical of the content they engage with on the application. Interestingly, Glenn mentions that he is not influenced by the algorithm with purchasing fashion items, however, is influenced through gaining knowledge and useful information through the form of video essays. For example, he states "if there's something that I want to learn more about – let's say Jill Sander's latest collection. Then I would search up that and use it more as an information suite rather than for searching up things to purchase". This sentiment suggests that algorithmic influence not only can be found through content promoting consumption, but additionally through the form of education and information gained from videos essays on shown to users on the app. Thus, participants held nuanced feelings towards being influenced by the algorithm, actively recognising the ways it positively influences them through the form of outfit 'inspo' and finding new creators to follow, however some critically recognise how this positions them as passive social media users.

Alongside interviewees themselves recognising how they are influenced by external forces such as other people's perceptions, content creators on the application and the algorithm itself, all participants observed TikTok's wider influence on fashion. Each participant discussed the role and wider influence that TikTok has on the newest fashion trends that proliferate and become popular beyond the app. In turn, participants perceived TikTok as a platform that assists in the proliferation of microtrends and fast fashion as a result of its algorithm. Gia for example commented that the nature of TikTok "helps microtrends thrive". In addition to this, Glenn adds that the application has "definitely pushed the fast fashion thing a lot", adding that this is due to the very essence of the application itself encouraging viral content through its algorithm (Hammond,

2023; Muturi, 2024). This aligns with Weimann and Masri (2023), as the very nature of the application's algorithm encourages virality in comparison to other networking sites. As Naomi explains:

When you're exposed to so many different styles and if something catches on, you're like; 'Oh, I want to be a part of that too'. And the more you see it, the cooler it looks. So yeah, I think it's the constant exposure to a really quick changing trend cycle. Because yeah, you can see photos of me from 2020 to 2022 even and you'd think; 'What was she up to' [Laughs].

Participant Gia similarly mentions fashion trends on the app that gain virality, noting how "everyone buys it instantly and suddenly a week later everyone's wearing it and posting about it, and then suddenly it becomes not cool" due to overexposure and quickened popularisation. These findings reinforce Muturi (2024), as the nature of viral dress items and their fast fashion duplicates can reach virality within days or even hours, through the assistance of the algorithm. Furthermore, some participants actively noticed that due to the nature of the algorithm, fashion trends felt larger and more popular than they actually were due to the competence of the algorithm. Gia for example expressed that trends on the app "feel massive and everyone has it because of TikTok", however further recognises that in 'real life' these items are hardly worn by others. In turn, participants consciously understood and recognised how the algorithmic 'For You' page shows highly personalised content (Tolentino, 2019), and how it can encourage filter bubbles which limit exposure to actual fashion worn outside of the online fashion community (Muturi, 2024). Thus, these findings suggest that the cohort's user perceptions may at times be altered by what the algorithm feeds them, with users actively aware of its influential capabilities.

Additionally, some participants acknowledged TikTok's' continued immense role within the world of fashion, noting how the app not only influences the new trending styles, but allows 'space' for smaller fashion subgroups. Participants such as Dawn mention how TikTok as a 'big app' has large influence on the way others dress, mentioning that "You can tell as well, with what people are wearing around you [...] 'Oh, like I've seen that on TikTok before so that must be where they got it from or maybe where they got that idea". On a similar note, Bella mentions that TikTok is "one of the bigger" platforms in which people get their fashion influence, with an alternative being the application Pinterest. Poppy argues that TikTok has "opened up the fashion space

more than Instagram has”, adding that the app allows users to explore “different niches” and smaller fashion sub-groups within the wider community through assistance of the algorithm. Therefore, these findings propose that participants were actively aware of the algorithm's wider external influence and role within the creation and acceleration of fashion trends beyond the application, suggesting that TikTok continues its prevalence within its users' lives.

4.5 Critical and Social Awareness

4.5.1 Of Consumption

In addition to how participants interpreted fashion and discussions surrounding the complexities of influence in terms of other people and themselves, interviewees began to focus on their own usage and purchasing habits. Participants generally held a high level of consciousness and possessed a strong sense of critical and social awareness in terms of their own dress consumption habits and what they chose to purchase. In turn, participants held a high level of self-reflection and introspection and a critical engagement process before engaging in the act of purchasing fashion goods since becoming more involved in fashion. Bella for example mentioned how since studying fashion, she avoids online shopping the ‘hardest’ she can, finding it difficult to ‘find the point’ in impulse shopping, stating “I try not to buy it directly after just seeing it”. Bella further states “I feel back then I would buy something new very often every other week, but now, it's barely. I really take time to think of what I'm buying and what it's going to affect”. Gia additionally encouraged others to ‘think more about themselves’ before partaking in consumption rather than buying the next fashion trend, adding that people should always question “Do I actually like this? Or am I just trying to say something?”. Aligning the findings of Burke and Reitzes (1981), participants were critically aware that fashion worn can transmit deeper meanings and messages to those around them, only buying specific items that align with their self-concept. These findings propose that some participants consume fashion with a higher level of social awareness and consciousness, with interviewees discerning and taking time to consider whether the piece aligns with their own self-concepts prior to purchasing. Additionally, participants expressed that they questioned their purchasing intent, taking time to consider whether or not they ‘like’ the item or if it is just an act of overconsumption and

an impulsive purchase. In turn, this may suggest that for this cohort of Generation Z users, they are consciously and critically engaging with every fashion item prior to purchasing, proposing that users are not simply susceptible shoppers of trending fashion items.

In addition to critical engagement with their own consumption habits, some participants expressed that a slower process of fashion consumption aligned more with their personal values and self-concept (Horn & Gurel, 1975; Valkenburg, 2017). For example, participant Naomi referred to her own shirt, stating “I've been wanting it for ages, it's from [Brand]. And I was like; ‘Oh, I could just get something similar, or I could just go without it.’ But the feeling of buying the exact one I wanted was unmatched. [...] It's been a long time since I've settled for an item of clothing”. Participant Dawn extends this notion, mentioning how she now values sustainability and slow fashion more, adding “before I would just over consume fashion...even though I was still thrifting...I would buy it even if I had no thoughts about wearing it in a way [...] I do own a lot of things and in a way. But that's all personal to me”. This indicates that participants expressed a higher sense of fulfilment when an exact item is purchased over time in a slower and more thoughtful process, with these purchases made aligning with their own personal self-concepts.

Interestingly, through this preference expressed for slower and critical engagement with their fashion consumption habits, participants discussed the complexities of fashion ‘haul’ video content on the application. Interviewees expressed a range of nuanced feelings towards them, showing a pattern of selectiveness with the haul videos they engage with. For example, Gia mentioned watching haul videos “here and there”, however found herself specifically engaging with ones that feature curated items accumulated over a long period of time. On a more critical note, Naomi mentions that she is personally “funny” with haul videos, mentioning that she holds nuanced feelings whilst engaging with the content, ultimately believing that they are a “gross display of overconsumption”. However, Naomi simultaneously mentioned that despite the negative aspects of brands being “shoved in your face” and a general sense of excessiveness, she also finds the content inspiring if “cool small brands” are shown and new brand knowledge is gained. Partly in line with Pangalila and Aprilianty (2022), haul videos do have some form of impact on the purchase decisions of some participants, however, effect the cohort if they feature slower and more ‘curated’ pieces that are

collected over time. Conversely, some participants strictly held negative viewpoints towards haul videos proliferating on the app. Participants such as Poppy mentioned that “I get inspired by people who dare to be a bit different, who find unique ways to style things and have more of a slower approach to fashion. I don't enjoy watching people do fast fashion [Brand] hauls”. Therefore, these findings indicate that participants are actively selective with haul style video content consumed on the application, with fashion consumption allowed if the items in the video align with their self-concepts and personal style tastes. Furthermore, the findings suggest that interviewees as users prefer displays of slow fashion whilst engaging with the app, in turn rejecting content promoting fast fashion.

In turn, participants expressed a high level of social awareness regarding the environment, stressing the importance of sustainability. With this, a preference towards ‘slower’ fashion over fast fashion was commonly expressed amongst participants, commenting on both the purchasing decisions of others and in turn, their own fashion consumption habits. Dawn mentioned that there is a “big light” today in slowing down with fashion purchases online in comparison to a few years ago. Dawn further commented that other users are now “definitely understanding it a bit more”, through purchasing consciously with the environment in mind. Bella echoed a similar sentiment of the heightened awareness of sustainability today as a result of the current economy, adding “No one has money to buy clothes [...] So, everyone is thrifting. Everyone is more sustainable. Not everyone [...] but more environmentally conscious”. Some participants stressed that slower fashion was higher in quality, with Naomi discussing a preference towards one quality fashion piece over a cheaper “rip off”. Poppy extended this notion, mentioning that working with premium brands has exposed her to many higher quality slow fashion New Zealand brands and clothing, adding that “the quality is there”. This suggests that for this cohort of Generation Zers, slower fashion is favoured, alongside sustainability and quality over purchasing fast fashion.

With this, the discussion then reverted back to the proliferation of online fashion microtrends (Reilly & Hawley, 2019), with participants criticising the negative effects had on the environment as a result of their promotion on the app. Participants all held extensive knowledge in regard to how microtrends were accelerated fashion trends only adopted by few online (Reilly & Hawley, 2019). In turn, participants argued that microtrends negatively impact the environment due to how quickly they change,

reflecting the nature of fast fashion shortening the clothing output cycle (Carlotto, 2018; Fletcher, 2010). For example, Bella stressed that microtrends are “bad” because they ultimately encourage overconsumption and quick replacement by users: “They're buying all this and then they're throwing it out in a few months or they're not using it in a few months. It's bad in that way [...] But yeah, where did it all go? Is it just immediately gone out of their own closets?”. Similarly, Gia comments that she dislikes users becoming quickly “obsessed” with certain fashion items on the app, adding “everyone buys that microtrend that goes viral and then everyone gets sick of it [...] it's surely bad for the environment, you know. It's not good”. Interestingly, some participants commented that microtrends reached their peak in popularity throughout the pandemic. Naomi perceived that microtrends cause “waste”, adding that they reached their peak online during the COVID-19 pandemic, with fast fashion companies contributing to the quickening output through price accessibility. Poppy further expressed “Yeah, I think it's really negative from a sustainability point of view. It obviously goes to landfill, and the consumption is more than ever. And especially with things like [Brand], it's so cheap but it's obviously accessible”. In line with the findings of Bauman (2013), the proliferation of fast fashion has quickened clothing production, distribution to customers and discarded by consumers to purchase the next fashion item, encouraging a sense of temporality through accessible pricing. In turn, these findings propose that participants expressed concern over how microtrends encourage quick disposal of clothing in which fast fashion companies encourage through accessible pricing.

Despite these beliefs, participants simultaneously held nuanced viewpoints towards fast fashion and the nature of microtrends. Participants actively understood why other users would partake in purchasing these goods for reasons such as affordability and cost barriers with purchasing smaller sustainable brands despite their detrimental effect on the environment. For example, Dawn expressed understanding of why other users may partake in purchasing fast fashion and microtrends on the app, commenting “if you're buying off certain places, people get mad at you online [...] But also some people can't afford more expensive stuff you know or something better elsewhere”. Poppy extended this understanding, factoring younger age as a reason other users partake in fast fashion consumption, adding “of course young girls on TikTok are going to get fast fashion because they don't have the money to afford [Brand] or anything like that”. Participant Naomi further recognised the complexity and nuanced nature of microtrends and fast fashion, commenting “I do understand that people can't

afford the original piece a lot of the time. So that does make it more complicated and it's quite nuanced". With this, the findings demonstrate how participants express a high level of environmental social awareness through preferring sustainability and slower fashion, suggesting a general shift in attitudes for the cohort towards higher quality and more expensive pieces. In turn, participants critiqued the negative environmental impact of microtrends, however recognised their nuanced nature and how some users can only afford the cheaper alternative for reasons such as cost barriers and age.

4.5.2 Of Values with Age

In addition to critical awareness of their own personal consumption habits and the wider social effects of fast fashion, participants recognised how their own values have shifted with age, reflected outwardly through their fashion sense. All participants expressed positive sentiments of feeling content with their current fashion identities, showcasing less interest towards trends proliferating on TikTok with age. For example, Dawn commented that with age, she has become more comfortable with dressing simple, stating how she is "really happy with just putting on just a pair of jeans and just like a t-shirt". Expressing a similar sentiment, Glenn mentioned how his fashion sense has adapted and matured with age whilst continuing to experiment with streetwear, adding "there's an element behind it where it's well thought of and more curated now with more thought put into it". Glenn further commented "I think another thing is with growth you sort of grow into these new taste habits and begin to know what you want for yourself and that obviously just comes with getting older and knowing yourself more". This suggests that participants experiment with their style and fashion sense, however, do so with positive attitudes as they are now comfortable and confident with their self-concepts (Choi et al., 2020; Valkenburg, 2017). Bell (1976) suggested that through consumption of goods such as fashion, this in turn plays a significant role within the formation of one's self-concept. These findings make a similar observation, as each participant expressed forming increasingly purposeful and embodied self-concepts with age, feeling comfortable to experiment with their fashion senses with thought.

In turn, some participants expressed that growing older played a crucial role in adapting their perceptions of style and their own self-concepts over time. Gia mentioned that her own self-concept and perceptions of her fashion identity have changed, commenting "You know, you'd see others and be like [...] 'Look at all these girls wearing these things' [...] but once you just start understanding yourself more, you

get to figure out; ‘Oh, I actually don't identify with that’”. Gia furthers this notion of age and social environment playing an important role in one’s self-concept, commenting “I'm not in that age group anymore [...] And the environment is also important. [...] when you're in high school, you're around the same people all the time [...] I would highly encourage people to think more about themselves”. In turn, some participants expressed that a higher level of certainty of one’s self-concept and fashion sense has become more apparent with age. Naomi expressed feeling uncertain when she was younger, mentioning how she now feels increasingly ‘sure’ of herself: “I know what I like and what I don't. I'm not trying out different aesthetics and TikTok trends anymore, and I'm not feeling uncertain which I think comes from being younger”. Aligning with Crane (2000), who suggested that one’s sense of fashion communicates a continual image towards those around them, participants critically reflected on both their self and social identities over time, with social environment playing a large role on the way one dresses (Akdemir, 2018). Additionally, ones’ age expectedly effects the weight of collective affirmation and social approval (Bauman, 1991; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009). With this, participants expressed how dependence on social approval and trend following lessened overtime, as higher levels of awareness and assurance of one's self concept and values increased with age.

Conversely, some participants expressed how their occupational roles increased levels of social awareness and external pressure, impacting their fashion identities. Student Bella for example commented on how she felt an increased desire to ‘fit in’, consciously recognising the need felt to present herself as ‘proper’ through wearing “tall boots” and “button up shirts” in anticipation of entering the workforce:

I'm definitely getting more conscious about how I fit in. I'm about to graduate and I'm thinking about things such as getting a job, which I need. I need clothes that are formal, and I need to look more presentable.

In addition to this sentiment, some industry connected participants commented on how entering the professional workforce has impacted their own sense of dress. Gia for example commented “getting older [...] I have a job to do. So, there's that aspect”. Furthering this notion, participants mentioned feeling a sense of pressure to be taken seriously through their dress choices within their work environments. Naomi for example expressed “I am expected to dress more professionally [...] I want and need clients especially to know that they can take me seriously, that I'm not just bumming around in

cool artsy clothes. Because [...] I'm representing a brand I need to look on top of my game". In line with the theory of symbolic interactionism which argues how one's self-concept becomes symbolic within a social context (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Kawamura, 2005; Mead, 1934), participants showcased awareness of how their dress choices transmit deeper meanings, evident through wanting to be viewed as 'professional'. In turn, these findings demonstrate the complexities of personal values shifting with age as for some participants, ageing allows for more assurance in their own self-concepts, whereas conversely for others, entering the workforce increases pressure to signal maturity.

4.6 Digital Representation and Connection

4.6.1 Nuanced Connection Towards TikTok Content

With participants aware of their own fashion consumption habits and values, this consciousness in turn underpinned how they engaged with the app and its content. All participants expressed that they are frequent users of TikTok, recognising what functionalities they utilised and interacted the most with for engaging with fashion content. For example, all participants engaged with fashion content on their 'For You' pages, with some interviewees noting they frequently visited their 'following' tabs. Some participants expressed that they primarily engage with content from specific fashion creators they each follow. Participant Naomi commented "I've built my following list, and I follow a lot of fashion people [...] I do spend a lot of time on the following tab [...] I like watching what I want to watch. I don't always want to watch my 'For You' page". Similarly, Poppy noted how she consumes content on the 'For You' page, commenting how she occasionally utilises the following tab as she follows specific overseas fashion creators from Australia and the United Kingdom. Additionally, some participants such as Bella mentioned utilising the search bar occasionally in pursuit for specific styling content:

I don't always search for fashion content, I think it just comes up on the 'For You' page. But sometimes if there's a piece that I have and I want to look at inspiration on how to style it, I'll look up for example: 'Issey Miyake Pleats Please Long Sleeve'.

In line with boyd (2010), participants utilised app features such as their home page, following tabs and search bar feature, finding distinct affordances that enable them to interact and seek fashion content whether or not it is actively sought for or presented to them. With participants aware of functions of TikTok they use, interviewees were further conscious of what content they engaged on the app, alongside whether it influences their own fashion identities or not.

In turn, a large topic of discussion for participants were their own feelings towards the fashion content they engaged with on TikTok. Some interviewees expressed positive connection towards the fashion content they engaged with, primarily due to the platform's easy nature. Dawn for example commented how the application has influenced who she is today, adding "personally, I love it. I think it's just really easy. From the surface [...] it's a good way to find things". Dawn additionally added that TikTok content assists with confidence with her own fashion choices, commenting that "seeing other people not necessarily dressing the same, but with the same kind of idea [...] It helps me come out of my shell a little bit more [...] otherwise I would be a bit anxious". Sharing a similar sentiment, Naomi commented on the influence the application has on her purchasing decisions its role as a source of inspiration for styling, adding "it influences what I buy. It's opened up a whole world of brands and ways of styling clothes [...] that I wouldn't have thought of myself". For some participants, a positive connection and sense of value was found whilst engaging with educational TikTok content and getting educated from creators on the platform. Glenn for example noted "Most of the content I watch is very informative...it's very much videos with people talking about someone's collection. More theory based rather than; 'Look at these new Sambas that I got'". With this notion, participants such as Glenn view a positive value in TikTok in the form of education by engaging with video essays rather than consumption. This may suggest that TikTok users are not simply inferring meaning, however they are also seeking it. Therefore, these findings highlight the influence the application has for users which in turn, garner positive connections towards the app's content by the cohort.

In turn, the dialogue focused on how participants were critically aware of how they were influenced by the application. All participants were conscious of how their algorithmic 'For You' pages feed them content catered to their own likings and interests,

demonstrating a general sense of active media literacy. For example, participant Poppy mentioned how her algorithm at the moment is centred around showing overseas fashion content: “My algorithm is serving me things that I like. So, it's quite there's always fresh inspo, whether it's from people I'm following or other similar creators that I will then follow”. Bella extended this notion of the algorithm observing and feeding specific content specifically catered to her interests:

I think the algorithm definitely plays a big role in the fashion content I see [...] And the more you interact with a certain thing, the more they give it to you. [...] I see a lot of Japanese designer fashion. But I can imagine other people not getting the same. Maybe they get shown 'Office siren' content or 'Old Money' style.

In line with the findings of Gillespie (2014), the very nature of the algorithm decodes information on the user and in turn, feeds users the most relevant content. These findings propose that participants held a general understanding of the nature of the algorithms' ability for unique personalisation (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022), in turn holding critical awareness of the influence it has over themselves as users.

Some interviewees expressed nuanced feelings and connection levels towards the application, with a number of participants critiquing how they as users have a lack of control over what content they consume on the application. Bella expressed neutral feelings towards the application itself, however noted that this was dependent on the contents' nature, commenting “sometimes...I feel just in the nature of social media particularly TikTok, there's stuff that gets you angry such as seeing a microtrend because I don't want to see this”. As algorithms in their nature are designed to understand what trending content is most relevant to its users (Gillespie, 2014), these findings propose that at times the algorithm fails to capture entirely one's' interests, as participants expressed frustrations with the lack of autonomy over what content is presented. This suggests that users actively discern which content they feel connected and disconnected to, with the algorithm occasionally feeding content that is not attuned to each users' interests, resulting in user frustration. This additionally indicates a nuance as whilst users actively discern the content consumed, the algorithm still dictates content shown, with users in turn individually determining its meaning and individual connection.

With this, some participants interrogated the algorithms' nature, expressing concern over how it continuously monitors user activity. Participants such as Dawn hold a general awareness of the nature of the algorithm, mentioning how it "always watches what you're interacting with". Glenn further comments "Sometimes I see stuff and I'm like; 'I swear I just thought of that'. And it's kind of scary. [...] I'm thinking of a specific type of clothing. And then the next day it will have someone talking about that exact brand and the fabric, and I'll be like; 'What the [Obscenity]?'. Interestingly, these findings are similarly in line with Fu and Cook (2020) as participants commonly share concerns over the algorithms' ever 'watching' presence and ability to survey user activity. In turn, some participants interrogated how the applications' algorithmic 'For You' page puts users in a passive state of content consumption. For participants such as Bella, she mentions feeling 'weary' whilst on the app, actively attempting to not be 'brain switched off' whilst engaging with content, limiting her daily screen time as the application can sometimes "have you on a loop for hours". Glenn extended this comment, adding how the algorithm itself and the layout of the app places users "in a state of almost choosing" what content they want to consume. These findings suggest that participants are highly conscious of the algorithm's monitoring nature and ability to create passivity whilst scrolling, with efforts displayed to maintain active engagement being made. This may suggest that for this cohort, users critically acknowledge both the gratifications and concerns of the application and the content engaged with, as content consumed is not solely absorbed or completely rejected. This further suggests that users confidently partake within the wider domain of content consumption, however, also hold concern over its influence.

Furthermore, participants simultaneously exhibited pessimistic feelings towards TikTok content, with some expressing feeling overwhelmed by consistent exposure to fashion content on the app. Naomi for example expressed feeling a sense of 'bombardment' whilst using the app, stating "I guess we are just completely bombarded with different personalities, different styles, different trends". Participant Glenn extended this notion, critically adding "You can look up anything to do with fashion and be exposed to it. I think it's just all in our faces because there's so much content and stuff out there". These findings propose the complex connection experienced by participants towards the TikTok content they consume, showcasing a shared sense of interrogation from interviewees as TikTok continues to pervade the lives of its user base.

Additionally, a number of participants as TikTok content creators themselves expressed pessimistic feelings towards the content posted by other creators on the app, with self-comparison affecting their own identity perceptions negatively. Poppy for example mentioned feeling “inferior” to other New Zealand based content creators, adding “there's a creator in New Zealand, and she's doing a really good job. [...] she's able to make so much content with the new clothes she's getting [...] And it almost feels like; ‘How am I going to keep up with that?’. [...] I feel there's pressure there”. Gia adds to this, commenting on how the platform encourages continuous self-comparison to others, impacting her own identity perceptions: “I will still constantly compare myself to [...] whoever I think is cool [...] so definitely affects how I view myself. It also makes me question myself and what my true intentions are when I buy things and when I put things together”. Poppy further expressed frustration with her own reliance on the application for fashion inspiration:

Before I started using TikTok I feel I didn't rely so much on what others were wearing [...] But now I feel a pull to look at what others wear, which is annoying [...] Definitely I feel there's always a bit of jealousy [...] now I can't help but feel I should look at what they're doing.

In turn, these findings reinforce the idea of fashion being rooted within individual social comparison as suggested by Cannon (1998), further suggesting that whilst participants can find positive connection with TikTok content, they simultaneously struggle with negative self-comparison whilst using the app. Therefore, despite positively attributing TikTok content as a form of fashion inspiration and point of reference, interviewees concurrently attribute the application having negative self-comparison and self-concept effects due to continued exposure to fashion content on the app.

4.6.2 Identity Representation on TikTok is Nuanced

Similar to the varying perspectives towards the application's algorithm and content, participants expressed nuanced views towards how their self-concepts are and are not accurately represented on TikTok and in turn, the effects this has on their own identity perceptions. Some interviewees expressed that TikTok content has influenced and impacted their own dress sense, reinforcing that it is an accurate representation of their own fashion identities. For example, Naomi commented that the application represents her own taste in fashion and encourages to experiment with her

style more: “it’s made me want to be a bit more adventurous. It makes me want to try new things, in a positive way”. Naomi’s belief is that she has successfully curated her algorithm, so the content fed to her is highly relevant and aspirational. Dawn furthers this sentiment, commenting on how application does affect how she perceives her own fashion identity: “I used to dress very emo [...] that did come from TikTok [...] So I think a lot of the trends and stuff that I’ve incorporated have come from there [...] it definitely does influence a lot of how I dress”. Poppy also mentions that TikTok influences how she dresses today, reinforcing that TikTok is an accurate representation of her own fashion identity. As Lee et al. (2022) suggests that users feel their identity is accurately represented on the applications’ ‘For You’ page as it presents a variety of personalised interests, with the views of participants in this study seeming to reinforce this observation.

However, with this, some participants commented that whilst TikTok is an accurate reflection of their interests, it is not a true representation of their identity. Glenn for example commented “I guess in a way it does represent what I like about fashion [...] those people that I pay attention to and watch, we’re completely different. So, I don’t think that my identity is like them and represented through them.”. Through this sentiment, Glenn stresses how the content he consumes does not necessarily represent his own identity, however, does reflect what he favours in terms of fashion as he separates the two. Similarly, participant Bella states that at times the content shown to her is not a reflection of her personal fashion identity such as some ‘Outfit of the day’ videos she has engaged with, commenting “I think a lot of stuff I see in terms of OOTDs are some things that I wouldn’t wear and it’s just what the algorithm is showing me, like some of these things [...] isn’t my personal style”. This indicates that some participants actively separate their self-identities from the fashion content. In turn, these findings may indicate that self-representation on TikTok is complicated for users, as whilst the algorithm feeds fashion content seemingly aligned with their personal interests, users ultimately discern whether or not it is relevant.

Some participants expressed that rather than showcasing their current fashion identities, the application instead feeds aspirational content that reflects who they *want* to be. Gia expressed this notion, commenting:

It's all that aspirational content, right? [...] it reflects who I want to be and not necessarily who I am [...] part of your identity is your values and your goals...but it's not really a complete reflection of who you are right now.

Interestingly, participants commented on how the content they consumed is 'aspirational' rather than a complete reflection of their current identities, showcasing a deeper level of discernment and separation with the content they engage with. These findings partly align with Lee et al. (2022), as participants argued that the algorithm is accurately attuned to their own personal interests, however, feel their identities are only partly represented. This sentiment reinforces the complex nature of influence as it can also take the form of aspirational content that can both motivate or demotivate users. Thus, views on self-representation on the application were nuanced and varied amongst participants. Whilst a number of interviewees believe that the app is an accurate representation of their own fashion tastes and in turn identities, conversely, some found that TikTok accurately captures their interests and aspirations, however not their current identity.

4.7 Conclusion

Overall, each participants' interpretations of fashion were impacted through their own subjective position, with their occupational roles affecting the meanings ascribed despite being a part of the same demographic. With this, participants as current students or workers adapting to the fashion industry interpreted fashion's meaning differently, additionally viewing fashion as an extension of their personal identities. Participants reinforced the notion that fashion is a form of communication (Barnard, 1996; Kawamura, 2005) by expressing awareness of their own conscious judgements of what others wear. Focusing on their own fashion sense, participants expressed that emitting 'coolness' to others was a clear aspiration. This in turn shaped judgements of other fashion creators on TikTok aspiring for 'coolness', critiquing the nature of fashion on the app as mostly performative, revealing a complex contradiction. This notion reflects a wider interrogation and critique amongst participants of waning authentic self-presentations online. These interpretations of fashion shaped how interviewees perceived the current "state" of the contemporary fashion world. Through discussion of microtrends, participants interpreted the state of fashion today as primarily 'top down' (Kawamura, 2005; Simmel, 1957) despite the illusion of a 'bottom up' effect social media

portrays, noting how they originate from fashion influencers and brands. By discussing microtrends, interviewees critiqued the ever-quickening pace of trend cycles, however noted that longer fashion cycles still remain relevant. This observation may suggest a wider trend apparent amongst Gen Zers shifting towards and favouring slow fashion and more thoughtful consumption. Therefore, these findings exhibit the complex and counterintuitive nature of contemporary fashion as with dress cycles being perceived as both quickening and slowing down simultaneously; a dissonance is revealed as both perspectives are concurrently true.

Interviewees expressed varied and nuanced feelings towards influence and its complexities. Focusing on the influence that external perceptions of others have, participants themselves critiqued other people who were coined “lower level” fashion engagers. With this, participants attributed less personhood towards them as they perceived that are trend followers as a form of social affirmation and collectivism. In turn, participants commended and attached personhood to the fraction of low level fashion engagers that embraced personal style. Focusing on their own experiences with being influence from external perceptions, nuance was apparent as some participants were not influenced whilst some were affected by the opinions of others within their fashion in-group, which in turn shaped their fashion choices. All participants were critically engaged with content consumed on TikTok, actively choosing and rejecting messaging from content creators and discerning when they wish to be influenced. Participants expressed finding merit in being influenced by creators through the form of fashion inspiration and styling or by consuming educational content on the app. Achievability and reliability of TikTok creators played a significant role within each participants’ susceptibility to influence, with active awareness of how they are both susceptible and discerning of influencer content, rejecting content perceived as inauthentic. In turn, participants preferred niche content creators or ‘micro-influencers’, as they were considered more in-line with their own fashion senses and more trustworthy. Furthermore, participants held complex views towards the influence from TikTok’s algorithm and the content it feeds them. Participants expressed positive aspects of the algorithm such as the recommendation of new creators and critical weariness towards the limited content exposure, risking the creation of filter bubbles (Muturi, 2024) and perception shaping. Furthermore, interviewees expressed the wider influence that TikTok has on fashion trends today, noting that the app has allowed easy accessibility to many smaller fashion niches and the creation of subgroups. Therefore,

these findings showcase how participants were actively aware of the wider role and influence that TikTok has on them as users and in turn, wider fashion trends, reinforcing the app's continued impact.

With the theme of critical and social awareness, participants revealed an increasingly conscious reflection of their own fashion consumption habits, highlighting deeper levels of engagement before purchasing fashion items. Each participant engaged with conscious fashion consumption, considering prior to purchasing whether the fashion item aligns with their self-concept, rather than merely engaging with overconsumption. In turn, nuanced viewpoints towards haul videos on TikTok were revealed, with some interviewees expressing critique if the video encourages overconsumption, whereas some expressed favourability if the content showed slowly curated items and small brands. With this, all participants all valued sustainability, with a preference towards high quality fashion goods over fast fashion alternatives, noting how they encourage overconsumption and negatively affect the environment. Additionally, interviewees were critically conscious of how their own values and consumption habits have changed with age, which in turn reflected their fashion sense and purchasing decisions. Some expressed that a deeper understanding their values and self-concepts with age lessened the need for social approval, whereas others commented that a sense of pressure has increased due to their occupational roles and the need to signal maturity. Therefore, the findings illustrate that for participants, personal values changing with age holds nuance. For some interviewees, self-assurance and confidence was gained with a age yet for others, social pressure and the need to signal professionalism was a reality.

Lastly, the theme of digital representation and connection highlighted how participants held nuanced feelings perspectives towards the content engaged with on the application and the platform itself. The findings affirmed the continued influence that the app has with being a source of fashion inspiration and a source of education for users, which participants expressed positive connection towards. In turn, this suggests that participants as TikTok users search for meaning through the apps' content, whilst inferring it simultaneously. Participants further expressed positive feelings towards the applications' role as a source of fashion inspiration and education, however additionally critiqued the lack of control over what content is fed to them. Participants expressed concern over algorithmic surveillance, showcasing weariness over occasional passive

scrolling, thus prioritising active discernment of the content engaged with. These findings suggest that users partake within the domain in which the algorithm controls as passive users, however actively discern and control engagement with the content consumed. For participants that are posters of content themselves, pessimistic notions of self-comparison whilst engaging with other creators on the app were expressed, negatively impacting their own self-identity perceptions. Participants expressed nuanced viewpoints on whether the content they engaged with aligned with their own self-representations. Some expressed that their feeds accurately represent their own identity perceptions, whilst others noted it aligns with their interests in fashion instead. Interestingly, some participants expressed that rather than the application showcasing their current fashion identities, it presents them with aspirational content of who they want to be. These findings propose that self-representation on the application is complex for this specific cohort, as whilst TikTok provides users with content accurately aligned with their personal interests, users themselves ultimately discern whether or not it is relevant.

Together, these insights provide a richer understanding of how fashion as a form of communication (Barnard, 1996) is understood by this specific cohort within the online context of TikTok, having analysed how these users created meaning as either posters or engagers of fashion content. Furthermore, these findings revealed the applications' role and impact on the cohort's fashion choices and in turn, their identity perceptions. In turn, the following chapter continues this analysis through the application of Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory, exploring its relevance and apparent tension within the contemporary context of TikTok.

Chapter Five: Revisiting Simmel - Individuality and Trend Following in the Age of TikTok

5.1 Introduction

Within the previous chapter, the first four themes of interpreting fashion, the complexities of influence, critical and social awareness and digital representation and connection were discussed in detail. One of the initial motivators of this current research study was aiming to assess Simmel's (1957) notion of fashion dualism and its relevance within a contemporary online context. This chapter details the remaining two prominent themes of 'individuality' and 'trend following', addressing the second aspect of the research problem. Additionally, this chapter contributes towards the larger philosophical question of the continued tension between imitation and distinction, originally introduced through Simmel's (1957) dualistic theory. With this, the relevance of Simmel's dualistic fashion theory is analysed through the lens of highly fashion-conscious Generation Zers engaging with TikTok and its content. Furthermore, the themes aim to explore whether a tension between individuality and collective identity is present and if so, how it is both experienced and navigated on the application by this cohort within this specific context.

As this chapter discusses, this study's findings offer both consistencies and contrasts from Simmel's original notion of tension introduced in his seminal 1904 article. Within the article, Simmel dissected the process of fashion adoption, having viewed it as a contradictory tension between inclusion and difference (Aspers & Godart, 2013; Simmel, 1957). Simmel further expressed that fashion satisfies a person's desire for both unique differentiation and individuality, whilst also allowing for imitation and collective adaptation. Therefore, fashion is found in the tension of distinction through individuality and imitation through trend following, noting that there cannot be one without the other (Benvenuto, 2000; Mackinney-Valentin, 2014; Schulz, 2018; Simmel, 1957), revealing a 'fashionable paradox'. As Simmel (1957) originally noted:

Two social tendencies are essential to the establishment of fashion, namely, the need of union on the one hand and the need for isolation on the other. Should one of these be absent, fashion will not be formed - its sway will abruptly end. (p. 546)

With this, descriptions of Simmel's original notion of dualistic tension continue to be explored. As Mackinney-Valentin (2014) argues, "More than a century since Simmel formulated this fashionable paradox [1904], the double standard of personal distinction and collective imitation appears to still be valid in some form despite the altered conditions for fashion consumption" (p. 129). Through this, an underlying social paradox of separating from social norms and collectivism, whilst also following them is highlighted (Dollhopf, 2011; McCracken, 1988; Simmel, 1957). Changing conditions over the last century have seen a decline in the importance of class, with Simmel (1957) originally arguing that the upper-class utilised dress to differentiate from the lower. Furthermore, Simmel (1957) noted how once the lower class adopted pieces of dress worn by the upper class, this would result with the elite abandoning items which in turn creates a never-ending circle (Simmel, 1957). In turn, there is opportunity to explore the two tendencies of distinction and imitation within the online context of TikTok. Strikingly, prominent amongst participants was their high awareness levels of not only their own fashion decision making processes and values, but of other fashion interested users they monitor online, which further informs their views and understandings (Lyon, 2024).

5.2 Individuality

5.2.1 Valuing Individuality

The notion of uniqueness and the curation of one's personal style to differentiate from the collective other was highly valued amongst all participants, being a strong motivator within their own fashion decision making process. This was often presented in distinct contrast to trend following as participants attributed higher value and favourability towards distinction and being different from those around them. Glenn for example commented "being individual definitely influences me way more than trend following", further expressing "I think for myself, I've always known what I like, and I've never wanted to sort of be someone else". Similarly, Poppy commented that by "succumbing to trends" she stressed that she would not be doing herself "justice", expressing her desire to have her special "thing" that feels unique. Through this, Simmel's (1957) paradigm is suggested to be in play as whilst it is a common experience to prioritise uniqueness, participants actively valued distinction by understanding it directly alongside trend following (Aspers & Godart, 2013).

In terms of their own stances on both distinction and imitation, participants expressed that they were “champions” of individuality rather than trend following. This notion apparent from participants reveals a shared view of individuality being viewed as favourable, attributing imitation as following others without critical thinking. Interestingly, this shared belief is contrary to Simmel’s (1957) rather positive reflections of this notion of tension, as whilst participants expressed being champions of individuality, this sense of empowerment through distinction stems from perceiving those around them through judgement. These critical judgements were increasingly in line with Veblen’s commentary who in contrast, viewed imitation as second-order (Kawamura, 2005; Veblen, 1957). For example, Poppy mentioned being a champion of “dressing how she wants”, adding that she encourages other practical dressers such as friends and family to realise there is increased potential in dressing differently, rather than dressing the same. Additionally, Gia noted that whilst she is a champion for being individual, she commented how no one is immune to trend following, further commenting “we need to encourage always being sceptical about things and always questioning things and questioning yourself [...] I think that whole process will lead you to better understand who you are as an individual”. With this, participants expressed a shared sentiment of being advocates of individuality, however still examined the fashion decision making of others, further highlighting how ones’ social and self-identities are both inherently linked (Bauman, 1991; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009).

Consistent with Simmel’s notion of dualism (1957), participants reinforced a sense of dichotomy, adding that despite individuality and ‘uniqueness’ being something they desired, certain trends *were* adopted if they aligned with their personal identity and values (Horn & Gurel, 1975). As such, these findings suggest that trend following cannot be completely rejected, as participants discern which trend is followed and ignored based on judgements they make. Glenn for example noted that “I still wear archival fashion despite it being trendy nowadays”. With this notion, participants simultaneously discussed partaking in and adopting certain trends despite valuing individuality and uniqueness. Bella expressed that she would buy into a trend if “the want has been there way long before it got big on TikTok”, with Dawn adding “I would want to make sure that I would want to get that and that I would still like it even if it wasn't a trend”. In turn, these shared sentiments suggest how all participants placed a high value on individuality. However, just as Simmel (1957) originally proposed, certain trends are adopted by this cohort of users if they align with their values and personal style,

showcasing how fashion finds function with both collectivism and individualism. As Simmel originally noted “Thus fashion represents nothing more than...the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change” (p. 543), further noting its double function of emphasising collectiveness and separating from others.

These acts of discernment showcased by participants not only highlight the fluidity of expressing individual and collective identity, however, can also be examined through contemporary notions of a “surveillance culture” (Lyons, 2024). Whilst using the app, participants interestingly formed their judgements and opinions regarding what is trending and what item of fashion is rejected is a result of monitoring content on TikTok. Lyon (2024) expressed that surveillance culture has adapted user attitudes and behaviours, becoming a mundane and unavoidable part of ones’ everyday day-to-day experience online and offline, as surveillance on social media has become an enjoyable interpersonal process. Through this notion, participants as TikTok users enact surveillance behaviour by monitoring content, in turn creating judgements on whether or not they choose to reject or accept the trend. For example, Glenn noted that being an active user on TikTok leads him to rejecting fashion trends on the app, noting “I think when I see a trend happening, you know, I’m sort of like; ‘Oh, I don’t want to follow that’”. Bella similarly expressed wanting an item of fashion less if she notices the item is trending, on her home feed, adding “I think with Adidas Sambas for example I’m like; ‘Okay, I’m not going to get Sambas because everyone has Sambas’”. However conversely, Dawn noted that she was influenced by the application to purchase the Adidas Sambas trend, commenting “I kept seeing them on the app and I was like; ‘Ooo I want those because I want to look cool’”. Interestingly, these findings display how participants discussed the same specific trend; however, it was viewed in different lights. Therefore, participants prioritised individuality and the active avoidance of trending fashion items. However, this sense of being independent paradoxically stems from the very act of policing what is trending through content posted from others, making sense through the shared experience of using TikTok, reflecting the dualistic notion Simmel (1957) originally proposed.

As discussed within the previous chapter, participants attributed lower-level fashion engagers as ‘others’ who follow trends, once again reinforcing the notion of the majority of others being conformists. The belief shared of only the small percentage

dressing 'unique' once again reinforces Simmel's original thesis as fashion exists between the two and one cannot exist without the other, with criticism of trend following itself being a crucial aspect of the function of fashion (Simmel, 1957). Furthermore, these criticisms participants held towards the vast majority partaking in imitation showcases how participants categorise other lower fashion engagers within the fashion out-group (Trepte, 2006), determining who fits within the in-group. In turn, this suggests a broader pattern of fashion-conscious Generation Zers preferring individualistic fashion, however distinction cannot be apparent without trend followers in turn were criticised. Simmel (1957) originally noted that fashion is a product of class distinction and how it can assist in maintaining one's role within a social circle. In turn, these findings allude to an increasingly levelled ground of fashion, with distinction embraced and admired by fashion-conscious users rather than just the elite. Further echoing Crane (2000) who argued that consumers are no longer only imitating fashion leaders but instead select styles based on how they perceive their own identities, participants found value in distinction. For example, Poppy noted "I feel it's quite rare to see someone have their own lane, but I really admire it when I see it". Naomi furthered this notion, expressing that a majority of others follow trends adding "when you get the people who dress differently, you're like; 'Oh my God, they're so cool'. They have their own style and they're not just following along". With this, these judgements of others expressed from participants encapsulates a wider human experience, highlighting the very tension between individuality and trend following as understanding what is distinct can only stem from monitoring of what is worn by others.

This tension of individuality versus trend following is further navigated and potentially even intensified by participants by consuming content on their TikTok feeds. In turn, participants described a wider trend of content focusing itself on distinction and personal style. Perhaps intensifying the dualism, individuality focused videos were considered by participants as the new trend in comparison to trend-based content. This shift reflects Simmel's (1957) paradigm, suggesting even a potential intensification of it as participants noted how content on TikTok now focuses on distinction, showcasing how the pendulum has swung the opposite way towards individualism. Bella for example explained "there is a bigger conversation right now about personal style [...] I think that everyone's shifting a bit more to individuality now. I think we've gotten conscious of okay; 'Maybe we are going overboard with the trends. Are we still individuals?'. Similarly, this general trend of TikTok content focused on finding personal

style was furthered by Gia, adding “you literally just need to live your life, and you'll figure that out. You don't need to keep finding yourself in these set identities online, that just means nothing”. With this, the notion of dualism is suggested to be apparent as this shift towards content distinction relates to Simmel (1957) as one informs the other, having originally noted:

All designations for this most general form of dualism within us [...] This type of duality applied to our spiritual nature causes the latter to be guided by the striving towards generalization on the one hand on the other by the desire to describe the single special element (p. 542).

Thus, this shared idea reflected through participants' answers suggests a wider trend of individuality through content proliferating on the application is recognised amongst the cohort, potentially even suggesting a shift online from collectivism towards individualism apparent within TikTok content.

Despite being influenced and motivated by uniqueness and personal style, the notion of individuality becomes complicated as participants noted that they follow specific content creators on the application. Furthermore, whilst interviewees desired and actively sought for individuality and distinction through their sense of styles, they still expressed partaking in and adopting certain trends if the fashion item aligned with their personal identity. Consistent with Simmel's (1957) theory of fashion duality, this notion further showcases a tension within participants themselves, as whilst personal style and ‘uniqueness’ was prioritised and valued, specific content creators on TikTok were still followed and referenced. In turn, this suggests a broader debate of *authentic* individuality online, with participants noting that social media's collective nature diminishes true authenticity and distinction through the act of following other creators on the application, revealing a contradiction. This in turn adds a level of complexity to Simmel's notion of duality as this online contemporary context may further complicate his dualistic tension originally noted. Poppy for example recognised how she herself follows creators on the app despite valuing personal style:

It sounds like I'm bloody a sheep if I'm following what another person is wearing. Maybe it takes away people's identities a little bit more because they're following loads of creators. Maybe it's follow trends or follow creators, and I'm following creators.

For some participants, the act of following other creators on TikTok created a sense of guilt. Bella for example expressed that “guilty” feelings arise when engaging with content from other creators, questioning: “Am I just copying someone off TikTok?” [...] I don’t know if it’s because of the conversations around personal style right now...but sometimes I get scared like; ‘Am I just copying someone?’, ‘Am I just following a trend?’”. Through this, despite participants seeking distinction, interviewees recognised how they may be influenced by specific creators they follow on the app. In turn, this suggests a paradox may be apparent amongst interviewees, as whilst they prioritised distinction, they continuously used TikTok to monitor what others are wearing and what is trending.

5.2.2 Conscious Effort to be Unique

With participants strongly valuing individuality, a common pattern reflected was a conscious effort from interviewees to be seen as fashion literate and unique, reflected through their own style and content they consume. This drive apparent from participants to signal fashion literacy and that they are not adhering to trends echoes Dollhopf (2011), who expressed that fashion manifests within the underlying social conflict between adhering to norms and diverging from them. For example, Naomi commented “I think TikTok [...] it’s made me want to be unique more. I want to be seen like I’m not like every other person [...] like I am a ‘trendsetter’. Like I want to be seen as fashionable”. Gia furthered this notion of being seen as distinct and purposefully wearing unique dress items to be seen as ‘different’, adding that “to me that difference is important. I don’t know why, but I like it when people are different and look different and do things differently”. With this preference towards uniqueness and rejection of mass, these findings similarly reinforce Newholm and Hopkinson (2009) who found that individuality was viewed as an accomplishment by their participants. Individuality was viewed as an *achievement* for this demographic, potentially even heightened through content consumption on the app. In turn, some participants commonly described trend followers as “sheep” who follow the collective herd, highlighting their own aspirations to differentiate. Poppy expressed that because of her deep interest in fashion, she would rather seek uniqueness: “to feel I was just in with everyone else. I’d be like; ‘Oh’ [...] I just don’t want to just be a sheep”. Sharing a similar sentiment, Gia commented “I just don’t want to seem like a sheep that’s following people [...] I really do want to

question myself like; ‘Do I like this or have I just seen this 20 million times on [Influencer]?’”. Once again, determinations of who is individual and who conforms to trend following from participants is established through the very act of analysing others through engaging with content on TikTok.

With this, individuality for participants is represented as a form of social value (Mackinney-Valentin, 2014), as interviewees paradoxically place effort into distinction, however, remain pressured by external in-group perceptions. These feelings of individuality and the internal motivator to differentiate rests upon social affirmation, as the self should somewhat ‘fit in’ with the in-group yet also hold some form of distinction (Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009; Trepte, 2006). For example, Naomi expressed how despite favouring distinction, being perceived still impacts her fashion choices, commenting “at the end of the day I’ll only wear things I want to wear, but I am also conscious of what other people will think of my outfit and what brands I’m wearing”. Gia furthers this notion as mentioned within the previous chapter, she specifically wears items of dress that allow her to be “a little bit different from the rest”. This notion harboured to be unique enough but not too different to still remain respected by fellow peers echoes the uniqueness model introduced by Snyder and Fromkin (1980). Snyder and Fromkin (1980) proposed that individuals compare themselves to others, seeking to be different but not ‘too’ different which is driven by pressure caused by social conformity. Naomi for example commented “I think it’s seen as you’re more respected in fashion if you don’t follow trends and you have your own style. Like it’s seen as cool to be seen as different”. With higher merit attributed towards individuality, a purposeful effort is made by this cohort to be viewed as unique, reflected through their fashion decision making and content consumed as individuality held higher social value and therefore, considered commendatory. This suggests a wider pattern of individuality being heightened through the consumption of TikTok content. alongside an increased sense of discernment of how one is perceived by others within their fashion in-group, as social value is gained from engaging with personal style.

In addition to consciously differentiating themselves and curating their own personal styles, a sense of pressure to ‘stay ahead’ was evoked by participants as they are heavily involved within fashion through their occupational roles. Again, consistent with a surveillance culture (Lyon, 2024), users as creators of content themselves feel empowered and motivated through the cultivation of ones’ image and presentation on

social media as they themselves feel monitored by the gaze of other viewers. Poppy for example expressed that as a fashion content creator on TikTok, “there’s this pressure, 100% [...] to keep up”, noting how content creation on TikTok drives her fashion choices to always stay ahead of trends and to innovate with her style. Naomi shared a similar sentiment, commenting that “especially in this industry as well with events and things like that [...] you want to be seen as you can afford it and that you've got your finger on the pulse, that you know these new brands and that you know what's trending next. You want to be the first to wear them”. Dawn attributed both studying fashion and the perceptions of other students to creating pressure to stay differentiated, noting “I'm worried maybe that they see me following a trend and then they think; ‘Oh, she doesn't have her own sense of style’ [...] something is just restricting me from doing that”. As a result, participants expressed a shared pressure to ‘stay ahead’ within their personal style, however a contradiction is revealed as they simultaneously make sense of their individuality through TikTok usage. This pressure resulted in the cultivation of a certain image and presentation on social media (Lyon, 2024) for participants, particularly for those who were TikTok creators on TikTok, as they cater their content and personal style for others, suggesting a paradox at play.

5.3 Trend Following

5.3.1 Trend Following is Nuanced

As with discussions surrounding individuality, a viewpoint shared by participants was the notion that the very nature of social media contributes towards an increased amount of trend following amongst others. In turn, this suggests a broader reflection apparent amongst participants of TikTok and social media applications encouraging collective imitation through the virality of trends online, with originality and individuality being immensely more difficult to achieve as a result. Considering Simmel’s (1957) theory of duality within this newfound online context, this may suggest that social media platforms such as TikTok further encourage a notion of collectivism as the application organises its users within a common network. Poppy for example noted that social media plays a large role in trend following, adding that people do not want to be viewed as ‘different’ but instead, ‘cool’ through following trends, commenting “we want to be seen in what everyone is wearing. I think we're probably afraid to step outside the box

in fear of being bullied or judged [...] so we'd rather just be like everyone else". Participants such as Gia attributed the very nature of having easily accessible exposure to content has had a large influence, noting "you're just exposed to so many more people and so many more things [...] you get to really see what other people like, because it becomes viral [...] that'll encourage people to follow trends". Gia furthered that by social media users being consistently connected online, distinction and originality is harder to achieve, additionally noting, "the loss of actual personal interactions with people makes you crave acceptance more, so you kind of lean into what everyone else likes". Through this notion, a wider perception amongst participants was revealed of social media applications further encouraging the notion of trend following and collectivism, suggesting Simmel's (1957) theory at play within this contemporary online context.

In turn, a shared concern expressed by participants was an increased expectation of individuality in comparison to engaging with fashion trends heightened on the application, which were further rejected. This may even propose that the very nature of TikTok as a social media platform may further intensify Simmel's (1957) notion of dualism, as the nature of social media platforms brings users together within a shared network, however, also allows individual distinction through trend rejection. Glenn commented that being an active user of TikTok motivated him to reject certain fashion trends more so than if he was not using the app, noting "when I see a trend happening, you know, I'm sort of like; 'Oh, I don't want to follow that'". Bella noted a similar experience of favouring a fashion item on the app, however repeatedly seeing the item worn discouraged her as she saw "everyone" wearing the trending piece. Similarly, Dawn discussed a pair of trousers with an apron detail, noting how she found those pants "cool" however added, "almost because I've seen them so much on TikTok, I feel if I'm seeing them in person I'd say; 'Oh, they probably got that idea off of TikTok'", which in turn led her to reject the trend. Therefore, through the nature of social media platforms such as TikTok showcasing trending fashion items, these findings may further suggest that Simmel's (1957) original notion of fashion duality may even be further intensified through this new contemporary context.

Whilst discussions surrounding trend following being met with negative criticism and rejection from participants, further nuance is apparent as interviewees additionally recognised positive aspects to collectivism. Whilst trend following is actively avoided

by participants, collectivism and imitation was additionally viewed introspectively, as interviewees additionally recognise the potential benefits it offers for those who choose to adopt trends, despite simultaneously critiquing its very nature. Bella commented how fashion trends are a great way to explore fashion, further noting that people do not live in a “vacuum”, and that one can bring their own personal flair whilst exploring trends. Naomi commented that one can find certain pieces that they can “wear forever” through trend adoption and exploration, adding how exploring through fashion trends can further assist in one’s distinct personal style. Interestingly, this reveals a contradiction as despite valuing individuality and criticising imitation, interviewees can recognise the positive aspects of trend following. These nuanced viewpoints on trend following also align with Simmel’s (1957) theory, as they recognise how imitation can be a necessary aspect of a social world.

Consistent with Simmel’s (1957) notion of tension, a perception apparent from participants may suggest that authenticity is most important to this cohort, regardless of if one decides to follow trends or embrace personal style. Dawn for example commented that “trend following is completely fine, as long as there's an extent to it [...] Because if you're purely following trends just because it's trending, not because you like it...then that becomes an issue”. Dawn furthers this sentiment, adding “knowing who you are and what you like is important when you are following trends because you’re making sure that you’re staying true to who you are”. Whilst Simmel (1957) did not directly utilise the word authenticity in his original article, Simmel alluded to personality and expression having noted, “Fashion always stands [...] at the periphery of personality, which regards itself as a *piece de résistance* for fashion, or at least can do so when called upon.” (p. 552). With this, Simmel (1957) expressed that fashion holds the ability for personal self-expression within the scope of what is allowed socially. In turn, these findings from participants suggest that within the wider dichotomy existing between individuality and collectivism, authenticity is proposed to be a focal point and potentially a resolution to this apparent tension.

5.3.2 Sense of “Sameness” Within Fashion Today

Referring to the wider collective of “Gen Z”, most participants expressed the belief that most members of the demographic follow trends rather than embracing

authentic individuality, creating a sense of predictability and imitation. Simmel (1957) originally established the notion of “the special” and “the general”, further stating “the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them” (p. 543). Despite Simmel (1957) discussing how the majority of lower-class citizens following trends originally worn by the upper class, this sentiment of wider collectivism is echoed by participants, expressing how most Generation Zer's dress the same. Bella for example commented “now no one's experimenting with their clothes. Everyone's just wearing the same thing”. Poppy furthered this notion of ‘sameness’ within contemporary fashion online today, adding “I think it just builds this uniform that you just see [...] no one's really got their own personal style. It's just following the crowd, just being a sheep”. With participants noting a general shift towards trend following over individuality today, a sense of “sameness” was coined by the researcher as interviewees commonly referred to the wider fashion world today as “basic”. In turn, this notion proposes a potential wider pattern of imbalance within fashion today, as participants perceived the online world as mainly a space of imitation and collectivism.

Furthermore, this broader sense of ‘sameness’ reflected by participants was also highly dependent on location, with a focus on New Zealand in comparison to overseas fashion. Poppy for example commented, “New Zealand is very slow compared to the likes of the UK and even Australia. I see New Zealand as not being very confident with style”. Naomi further attributed this notion of sameness to the country’s disparaging culture towards difference, noting “it’s just like New Zealand culture. I just feel if you dress differently and you weren't dressing to the trends here people would be like; ‘Whoa, calm down...fashionista over here’”. In addition to their activities on social media platforms, participants exhibited the act of ‘surveilling’ (Jones, 2020) both online and offline, as interviewees monitored both content online on the application and on their day-to-day lives on the street. Interestingly, participants additionally perceived that one’s location encourages people to dress the ‘same’, with social media spaces allowing for more individuality and self-expression in terms of one's' fashion choices. Poppy for example commented that the “vast population” of Generation Zers in New Zealand were trend followers, stating “a lot of girls fall into the space of dressing like a [Brand] girl, which is totally fine [...] everyone's wearing the same [Brand] cardigan, [Brand] and microtrends”. Bella further supported this notion by having commented “In New Zealand...Gen Zers are not very brave with their outfit choices, it's a bit more basic.

And people who want to dress a certain way, maybe they don't feel as comfortable as if they were somewhere else or if they were on an online space". Therefore, participant inconsistencies regarding the state of online fashion are present amongst the cohort as beliefs of both the online world harbouring imitation and distinction are apparent. Through monitoring both offline and online spaces, participants expressed the belief that the online world is a space of individual self-expression and that offline fashion in New Zealand is rooted in collectivism. Interestingly, this reveals contradictions as fashion online is perceived by participants as both a space for individuality expression and collectivist trend following, showcasing how the value and affordances of fashion on the application is nuanced.

With this, descriptions of 'sameness' expressed by participants within the localised context of New Zealand were at times contradictory to wider discussions surrounding the rise of personal style content on TikTok. In particular, a number of interviewees noted the rapid decline of microtrends on TikTok. In general, social media trends encapsulate the spread of information and ideas which garner attention from a wide range of users (Crane & Sornette, 2008; Zhang et al., 2016). Defined in earlier chapters, 'microtrends' in comparison to social media trends are understood as accelerated fashion items or aesthetics that do not reach wider adoption from the public nor become flourished trends (Reilly & Hawley, 2019), commonly only circulating on TikTok feeds.

From the perspective of participants, the quickening decline of microtrends on the app was seemingly a direct result of a new emphasis on personal style apparent through the content they engaged with on TikTok. In turn, interviewees expressed a 'new' wider trend of fashion content on the application surrounding individuality and seeking personal style. For example, Naomi noted "I see more people dressing more out there nowadays, more to their own personal style on TikTok now more than I think I ever had". With this, participants additionally noted that as a result, microtrends are becoming less relevant today. Bella commented on the microtrend of 'coquette' bows, inspired by a pastel palette and feminine details such as ribbons and bows, noting how they were only temporarily popular and hardly seen worn by people within her day-to-day life offline. This notion suggests that with the accelerated pace that microtrends gained popularity on TikTok, they decreased in proliferation at the same rate, being considered by participants as an aspect of the past. Bella expresses this sentiment,

commenting “maybe if this was a few months ago or a few years ago, Gen Z fashion would be very much about trends. A lot of microtrends, and how now it's kind of dying out”. Gia furthered this viewpoint of microtrends declining in relevance, adding “I do see them pop up, but I don't think it's that big anymore. Or maybe they just look different...but I definitely think it's less than what it was”. These findings suggest that the first-hand experience of the cohort online contrasts the sense of sameness they are observing offline. With the temporal nature of microtrends as articulated by participants, these findings propose just how rapidly TikTok its content changes as the wider fashion conversation on TikTok focuses on personal style. As microtrends are inherently quickened niche trends that rarely exist outside of TikTok, it is proposed that they are an articulation of Simmel’s (1957) dualistic discussion between imitation and distinction, within a new online lens and context. Furthermore, microtrends being perceived to be declining in popularity by participants may further suggest that this tension potentially plays out within the fashion content itself, not only experienced by the users which engage with it on the app.

5.4 Conclusion

Taken together, the themes of individuality and trend following demonstrate the continued relevance of Simmel’s (1957) notion of fashion as dualistic and perhaps, even paradoxical (Benvenuto, 2000; Dollhopf, 2011; Kawamura, 2005; Mackinney-Valentin, 2014; Schulz, 2018). The theme of individuality revealed a wider pattern evident amongst participants of higher value attached towards uniqueness and distinction from peers. In line with Simmel (1957), individuality cannot be apparent without trend following which was in most instances rejected by interviewees. Ultimately, participants viewed individuality favourably, negatively attributing trend following as imitation without critical thought. This in turn appears to be Simmel’s (1957) paradigm at play with one side of the pendulum being rejected and the other preferred, as empowerment through individualism stems from the very notion of judging and perceiving the fashion of others. Furthermore, Simmel’s (1957) theory was reinforced through the adoption of certain trends, showcasing how distinction cannot be apparent without imitation, as participants actively discerned which trend is followed and which is rejected.

Alongside Simmel's fashion theory of duality, the apparent rise of surveillance culture (Lyon, 2024) further supports interpretation of his original ideas and their relevance from an online context. Participants enacted a form of surveillance through TikTok usage, making critical judgements of what is trending and in turn, what is adopted and rejected through monitoring their 'For You' feeds. In doing so, all participants further prioritised individuality and actively avoided trending dress items, however paradoxically, this very understanding of trends derives from monitoring content posted from others on the application, echoing Simmel's (1957) original notion. With this, a wider pattern is apparent amongst the cohort of a preference for individuality, however distinction cannot be apparent without imitation which was in turn criticised by users. This very criticism and judgement enacted from participants encapsulates a wider human experience of favouring individuality, however this very understanding of what 'unique' stems from the act of monitoring others. In turn, this duality is even suggested to be intensified within the contemporary online context of TikTok, with the expectation of individuality becoming a collective concern and even a newfound trend. Furthermore, this dualistic tension was furthered as despite participants being motivated by distinction and uniqueness, interviewees still monitored content and actively followed other creators on TikTok, adopting certain trends if they aligned with their self-concept.

In turn, the theme of trend following highlighted the opposite end of Simmel's (1957) fashion paradigm and its ongoing relevance, fashion itself operates within this very tension between imitation and distinction. All participants shared the viewpoint that the nature of TikTok in turn encouraged an increased culture of collectivism on the app through trending fashion content, which in turn fuelled the perception that authentic individuality is hard to achieve. This wider notion exhibits how Simmel's (1957) original argument of fashion duality maintains its relevancy, alongside how it is further complicated within a contemporary online context. Discussions surrounding trend following were nuanced despite increased levels of discernment from participants and rejection, as the cohort additionally described trend following as multifaceted rather than simply negative. Conversations regarding the need for dualistic balance between individuality and collectivism were revealed, consistent with Simmel's (1957) original notion of duality and further adding nuance as authenticity is highly valued by the cohort. With this, it is suggested that authenticity may potentially be a strong focal point of this evident tension between imitation and distinction.

Additionally, a wider conversation regarding the Gen Z demographic as a whole arose, as participants expressed that most Generation Zers follow trends rather than embracing individuality and personal style. In turn, this generated a sense of ‘sameness’ experienced by interviewees in relation to fashion within the digital world, perceiving the online world as a space of collectivism through discussions of offline localised fashion. Participants critiqued New Zealand fashion in comparison to overseas dress, perceiving New Zealanders as being more inclined to follow trends. Interestingly, these perceptions contrasted their views of online fashion, where individuality was perceived to be expressed more freely on platforms such as TikTok. This in turn revealed an apparent dissonance present amongst participants regarding the online fashion world. As participants actively attributed fashion on TikTok to be a space of self-expression and individuality, interviewees simultaneously commented how it is a space of imitation and collectivism, highlighting a contradiction. Additionally, participants noted a general decrease of microtrend based content on the app, with the cohort’s first-hand experience online contrasting the sense of ‘sameness’ experienced offline. Through the temporary nature of microtrends and increase of content focusing on individuality, this reflects a wider notion of individuality being considered the ‘new’ trend on the application perceived by participants. With the quickening decline of microtrends as fashion trends, these findings propose that the pendulum has swung towards individuality once again, inherently being an articulation of Simmel’s (1957) original discussion of duality within an online context.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This current thesis sought to analyse the role and influence that fashion content on TikTok has on highly fashion-conscious users, including their own perceptions of identity and decision-making behaviours. Additionally, this study queried the relevance of Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory within the contemporary online context of TikTok, identifying the persistent paradoxical tension between individuality and trend following as users engage with fashion content on the application. From the outset of this research, a primary aim of the study was to explore and understand how participants interpreted both fashion today and their own identity through epistemology, which Crotty (1998) defines as "a way of understanding how we know what we know" (p. 3). Having adopted an epistemological approach of constructivism (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998), the study identified shared meaning amongst participants, supported by the researcher adopting a reflexive lens. As the researcher was able to identify meanings created by participants through analysis of their lived experiences, reflexivity was not only practised by the researcher but simultaneously exhibited by the participants as well. Within the beginning of the findings section, participants held dichotomous views and high levels of certainty regarding how they understood fashion; they were highly critical towards others and their choice of dress. However, as discussions progressed and became progressively centralised on the interviewees themselves, more nuanced viewpoints emerged, with participants becoming increasingly weary and discerning of their own relationship with TikTok content and its algorithm.

The findings of this study revealed that highly fashion-conscious Generation Z users were critically aware of their own relationship with TikTok, both in relation to its algorithm and the fashion centric content they consume. Participants exhibited judgement behaviours through monitoring other creators on the app to gain an understanding of what is trending, resulting in interviewees subsequently moderating their own fashion decision making. Furthermore, it was revealed that participants found merit in using the TikTok application for the purpose of gaining fashion inspiration, entertainment and education, discerning whether they chose to be influenced by other creators or not. In turn, these behaviours represented various influences on the participant's fashion consumption and dress sense. For example, participants prioritised slower modes of consumption, carefully considering whether an item of dress

aligns with their own self-concepts prior to purchasing. In this sense, participants were not only highly critical of the fashion decision making choices of others but additionally of their own, as they interrogated influence they encountered on the application and questioned how the algorithm operates. The findings suggest that participants as users are discerning, valuing authenticity and genuineness from the content creators they choose to follow and in their own assessments of others. With this, participants categorised themselves against or alongside the wider collective both online and offline experiences and behaviours. The findings ultimately highlight how these judgements and comparisons are embedded in the day-to-day human experience, exhibiting phenomena that may be easily taken for granted as "everyday" and instead revealing complex meaning from these participants.

Additionally, this study analysed the relevancy of Simmel's (1957) dualistic fashion theory. With focus on both individuality and trend following, participants revealed an existential tension between how one is similar and differentiated from others. Through analysis of Simmel's (1957) own observations of an apparent paradox, these existing ideas were seen to hold continued relevance. It appeared that they may even be intensified within the contemporary context of TikTok. The findings revealed a unanimous expectation that distinction through individuality was a strong motivator for each interviewees own practices, which paradoxically became a collective desire from the cohort. Furthermore, these findings suggest that individuality became a feature that was collectively monitored by the cohort on the TikTok app. With this, this study illustrates how authenticity within one's fashion choices is highly regarded by users, and a notion of genuineness even presents itself as a potential resolution to the tensions between being an individual and aligning with others. These current insights provide a deeper understanding of the fashion-conscious Gen Z TikTok user as the importance of authenticity is highlighted, indicating potential priorities for future fashion content.

The remaining sections of this chapter summarise the ways that this study has addressed each of the research questions. Following this, the research study's limitations are summarised in detail. In turn, the contributions and significance of the study for the fields of social media and fashion are discussed in detail, with consideration on how the research study provides useful insights regarding Gen Z social media usage and the role and influence TikTok has on this cohort. Additionally, the continued relevance of Simmel's (1957) original dualistic fashion theory is discussed,

alongside considerations on how Simmel's (1957) original dualistic fashion may also be extended for future research.

6.2 RQ1: How is fashion communicated and understood amongst members of the Generation Z demographic in New Zealand?

Overall, the findings highlighted how participants were highly aware and engaged with fashion as either current industry workers or tertiary students enrolled in relevant programmes. As Generation Zers involved with fashion, participants readily understood fashion as a form of communication, highly aware of fashion's ability to communicate deeper meanings and information of the wearer by recognising their own active judgements regarding what others wear. In turn, these judgements assisted participants with locating social behaviours within other creators such as strategic performances of 'coolness'. However, contradictions appeared as despite critiquing other users on TikTok for performing 'coolness', participants themselves additionally commented how 'coolness' was an aspiration for their own fashion choices. With this, participants viewed fashion content from other creators on TikTok as performative, adding that authentic self-presentations on the application are highly unachievable or impossible. Participants ascribed meaning and understood fashion based on their current life stages and their occupational roles, with different interpretations apparent despite being within the same Generation Z cohort. Tertiary student participants understood fashion through learning and practicality, emphasising fashion through an open and freethinking lens. Conversely, industry workers understood fashion through an operational lens, with increasingly 'jaded' emotions and pressure beginning to arise as they adjust to the workforce.

Furthermore, these meanings and interpretations of fashion informed how participants understood the state of the contemporary fashion world. Through discussion of the continued proliferation of microtrends, participants understood and perceived the state of fashion as still inherently 'top down' in nature. With this, participants perceived that microtrends stemmed from influential creators and brands on the application, despite social media portraying an illusion of a 'bottom up' effect. Through the continued proliferation of microtrends on TikTok, participants understood that the state of fashion is quickening in pace through noting a wider sudden shift from

maximalism to minimalist fashion. This is evident through sentiments shared by Gia, for example, who expressed “There's a lot of chat about, ‘Oh, I want to be classic now, I want to be a minimalist now’ [...] We've kind of swung the pendulum back into there”. However, participants additionally noted that longer fashion cycles still hold relevance. In turn, participants held nuanced interpretations of the nature of contemporary online fashion today, as the cohort concurrently understood fashion as both slowing down and quickening in nature.

6.3 RQ2: What role and influence does TikTok have on the fashion decision making process for highly fashion-conscious Generation Z New Zealanders?

Participant’s critical judgements and perceptions of strategic performativity on TikTok was often described through their use of TikTok and personally moderating content on the app by analysing the dress of other creators. Through this monitoring, participants understood what fashion was trending and shaped their own fashion choices to maintain uniqueness. For participants, the role and importance of TikTok was heightened, perceiving the application to hold a large influence over online trends and the contemporary fashion world.

Whilst interacting with TikTok content, participants expressed critical engagement with content posted from other creators on the app, highlighting active discernment of when they choose and reject influence. This may suggest that influence in some form occurs for all participants, however, it is not uniform. As users, interviewees actively selected what form of fashion content, from which creators, resonated with them rather than passively absorbing content that is fed to them by the app. Different forms of TikTok fashion content were identified as influential, with participants finding merit through being influenced in the form of fashion inspiration, styling, discovering new brands and learning from creators on the app through video essays. All interviewees expressed that smaller content creators and ‘micro-influencers’ were strongly preferred, perceiving them as more trustworthy and highly in-line with their personal fashion identities. In turn, the accessibility and relatability of creators and micro-influencers on the app played crucial roles within participant’s susceptibility to influence and in turn, their own fashion decision making. With this, all participants held

active awareness of how they were subject to being influenced by creators on TikTok, showing high levels of discernment, suggesting that this cohort of users not only passively consumes content, but actively curate their consumption.

6.4 RQ3: How do highly fashion-conscious Gen Z New Zealanders perceive their own identity through using TikTok?

Whilst participants recognised positive attributes that TikTok content offers such as fashion inspiration and education, interviewees also expressed weariness towards the lack of control over what content the algorithm feeds them. For participants that were content creators on the platform themselves such as Poppy and Gia, negative notions of self-comparison arose through engaging with content posted by other creators which in turn impacted their own perceptions of identity. Some participants expressed that the fashion content engaged with on TikTok accurately aligns with their own identity perceptions. Conversely, others noted that the content engaged with is not an accurate representation of their identities, however, it does align with their fashion interests, separating their self-identities from the app's content. Interestingly, some participants commented how the app's content does not align with their current fashion identities, however, instead accurately represents who they want to be on an aspirational level. This in turn suggests that identity perceptions amongst this cohort of users are complex, as influential content on the application can both motivate and demotivate, dependent on each person. Participants all adapted roles of fashion moderators through surveilling their TikTok feeds, monitoring what fashion is trending and discerning what is considered unique. With this, participants critiqued and questioned not only their own personal style but the style of others, fuelling a heightened expectation of uniqueness and individuality from other TikTok creators in line with their own values towards personal style.

6.5 RQ4: What is the relevance of Simmel's dualistic fashion theory in interpreting the experiences and behaviours of fashion-conscious Gen Z New Zealanders?

RQ5: Is there a tension between individuality versus collective identity and how is this experienced and navigated by highly fashion-conscious Generation Z New Zealanders through the application TikTok?

Through discussion with participants and exploration of both individuality and trend following, Simmel's (1957) original notion of fashion duality retained relevancy within the contemporary online context of TikTok. All participants attributed greater value to prioritising individuality and unique style over trend following. As participants articulated the value they placed on distinction and individuality, the expectation of 'being an individual' became a shared or collective concern online. As users of social media platforms such as TikTok, participants coexist with others on shared networks, but through key functions, the platform is also experienced individually, such as the user specific 'For You' feed. Thus, social media applications such as TikTok hold the ability to bring users together *and* maintain distinction through the curation of one's individual profile. With this, it is suggested that Simmel's (1957) dualistic notion may become intensely interwoven within participants' experiences of fashion as a form of communication.

Whilst originally RQ4 and RQ5 were intended to be explored separately, both questions were found to be inherently linked. Whilst an apparent tension was anticipated by the researcher, it was uncertain whether this notion of tension would align with Simmel's (1957) original dualistic theory. With discussions of individuality and trend following evident from participants, the findings propose that a tension may be apparent amongst the cohort. Whilst interviewees collectively expressed how they favoured individuality, a paradox is proposed as distinction and personal style are both actively discerned by users of TikTok. However, participants held inconsistent viewpoints surrounding individuality and trend following in general. Interestingly, whilst the cohort believed that TikTok encourages trend following behaviours encouraged by the algorithm, participants additionally suggested that the application encourages higher levels of individuality in comparison to day-to-day New Zealand fashion as observed offline. By monitoring their TikTok feeds, a common expectation of individuality became a tension that was informally moderated by the cohort, both by

analysing other users and reflecting on themselves. A conscious effort apparent amongst the interviewees, was the need to be perceived as unique by others. This was motivated by their heightened engagement with fashion, however simultaneously complicated when they noted that they were still influenced by others such as specific creators they follow on the application. Participants still adopted certain trends if they aligned with their own self-concepts, actively engaging with fashion content on TikTok and discerning what trends they choose to follow or reject. Interviewees highly valued authenticity regardless of whether one decides to embrace trends or distinguish themselves through personal style, suggesting how authenticity may be a potential focal point of this apparent tension. Furthermore, it is suggested that authenticity within one's style may even be a potential resolution to this evident pressure, highlighting the importance of genuineness as an anchor for this cohort.

6.6 Contributions and Significance of this Research

This current research has provided an empirical contribution towards the study of fashion, social media and the Generation Z demographic. This study offers new and fresh data regarding the cohort's subjective experiences and the ways they created meaning, particularly within a New Zealand context. With this, the findings offer updated insight into how into this cohort's encounters with fashion both online whilst using the TikTok app and within their day-to-day lives offline, adding to and updating existing research.

Theoretically, the research study has contributed new insight and context towards existing philosophical ideas of the role that fashion plays in communication. The findings reveal that participants as TikTok users, interact with fashion content selectively, discerning and choosing which content they are susceptible to and in turn, which creators they reject. By describing their experiences as creators or both active and passive consumers, it is highlighted how the cultural and symbolic landscape is rapidly evolving. Additionally, this study assists in further understanding the values of this specific cohort, highlighting how they search for authenticity and genuineness within not only their own fashion choices, but within the choices of creators they follow. In turn, this research study gives insight into how the cohort uses the application to monitor the fashion of others and understand what is trending, revealing that this in turn assists in their own dress choices. Furthermore, the study contributes further

understanding towards the types of content creators the participants allow influence from, as interviewees expressed favouring niche smaller creators or ‘micro-influencers’, viewing them favourably due to their perceived attainability, relatability and authenticity. With this, this research study furthers understandings of authenticity, placing a focus on the need for critical engagement with trends and how fashion is experienced online.

In terms of Simmel’s (1957) notion of fashion dualism, this research reaffirms its continued relevance within an online context as the tension between individuality and collectivism permeates the embodied experiences of the cohort. With this, the study reveals that for participants, individuality has become a collective expectation and concern, with authenticity suggested to be a focal point within this tension. In turn, it is further suggested that authenticity acts as an anchor for this cohort and may even be a potential resolution to this tension, furthering Simmel’s (1957) dualistic theory as the online context of social media may even intensify his original notion. This research additionally gives insight to the changing dynamics of fashion online and identity, highlighted through how participants rejected microtrends and buying into trends.

In terms of practical contributions of this study, the findings provide insight into the ways that these members of the fashion community understand social media and engage with the TikTok application and its content. The findings of this research may be of interest and beneficial to those involved within the fashion industry, consumers and social media users, as the study provides rich insight to better understand the dress conscious Gen Z fashion user.

6.7 Limitations

Whilst the current research study has provided many useful insights and notable contributions within the fields of fashion, social media and Generation Z research, it is important to also recognise where limitations may have impacted the study and its findings. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge sample size and the selection criteria for interviewees, as this research selected an in-depth study focusing on six Gen Z New Zealanders. Due to the low sample size of six interviewees, the generalisability of the research findings may be difficult to justify (Gray, 2014). A small sample was necessary due to the scope and timeframe of the project. A smaller sample size also permitted in-depth research, which was crucial to the study’s success. Despite in-depth interviews

providing a rich data set from the six participants that all held heightened interests and involvement in fashion, the findings are unlikely to reflect a general representation of the wider Generation Z demographic. However, with this, the additional criteria ensured that the participants had engaged with the relevant topics before the data collection commenced. Alongside the researcher having time constraints to complete the research study, the sample was also geographically defined and therefore also limiting.

Despite utilising reflexivity to avoid possible researcher bias, it is important to recognise the possibility that potential biases may have been present despite efforts throughout the data collection and analysis stages (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2014). Reflexive journaling and bracketing were employed by the researcher to reduce the possibility of bias; however absolute removal cannot be completely guaranteed. However, it is recognised that knowledge cannot be completely separated from the influence of the researcher, as these shape the findings that are formulated (Braun et al., 2022).

6.8 Future Research Recommendations

Whilst this research study contributes a well-grounded introduction for research focusing on the role, impact and influence that social media has on Gen Z users through the lens of fashion content, suggestions for future research are outlined. Firstly, different age demographics and their engagement with TikTok content can be explored in greater detail to see if any differences and similarities within the findings appear. Another direction that can be taken is in due course, analysing whether user behaviour and relationships with TikTok and its content have adapted or stayed the same. If another platform rises in popularity, analysing the role and impact the platform has on its users can be suggested. Future research can additionally take the philosophical underpinnings of this study and be applied to different geographic contexts (e.g. China, Russia, Brazil) with collectivist cultures or countries that do not use TikTok rather than being tested in Western contexts to see if the findings differ. Whilst the research study focuses on the localised context of New Zealand Generation Zers, there is additional opportunity to analyse if other members of the social cohort internationally utilise the TikTok application in similar ways. Additionally, there is potential to explore different forms of content other than fashion, such on beauty, body image, art, sports and politics.

Furthermore, the findings of this current study revealed that TikTok users search for authenticity and showcase high levels of discernment as they engage with the app. With these findings, there is opportunity for further research to explore into the relevance of authenticity and discernment levels of TikTok users within other contexts. Additionally, with participants showcasing high levels of critical engagement with the fashion content on their feeds, there is potential for future research to analyse how content is interacted with by users in greater detail. Lastly, as the study utilised in-depth interviews to prioritise rich data, there is possibility for future research to utilise quantitative methods such as surveys to provide a wider generalisability regarding the extent the application is used or alternatively conducting content analysis to examine the nature of the fashion content itself.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

7 October 2024

Rufus McEwan
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear Rufus

Re Ethics Application: **24/301 "Gen Z Fashion on TikTok: Navigating Identity Perceptions and Revisiting Simmel's Paradoxical Fashion Theory"**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 7 October 2027.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: vnh7661@autuni.ac.nz

Appendix Ba: Advertising Poster



FASHION STUDENTS NEEDED



**Are you Gen Z? Use TikTok?
Want to help out on a thesis?**

I'd love to hear your thoughts and experiences on online fashion, communication, TikTok and identity to assist in the completion of a Master's thesis.

60 min interview, snacks and a \$50 token of appreciation included.

Requirements:

- You live in Auckland
- Currently studying a BDes or MDes
- Part of the older Gen Z group (Aged 20 - 26)
- Use TikTok as a form of fashion content consumption and engagement

Sounds like you?

Send me an email at:
Monika Todorova
vnh7661@autuni.ac.nz



Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on **7th October 2024**, AUTECE Reference number **24/301**.

Appendix Bb: Recruitment Protocol



Recruitment Protocol

How will the initial contact with potential participants occur?

The study will employ, simultaneously, two distinct strategies to recruit participants.

Strategy One: When potential participants are identified on the basis of their public profile and/or professional position (e.g. as a fashion designer or influencer), initial contact with potential participants will be made directly by the primary researcher. The researcher will extend an invitation to participate in the study through publicly available contact information identified on a professional website or verified public social media accounts. Contact will be made via email (if available), otherwise, direct messaging will be used to request an appropriate email address for contact.

Strategy Two: Existing contacts, already familiar with the study, will be encouraged to provide details of the study to anyone else (e.g. fashion students, industry professionals) that may be interested in participating. Potential participants will then be able to make direct contact with the primary researcher via key information (e.g. the information sheet) which will have been provided by the initial contact.

How will the contact details of potential participants be collected and by whom?

The contact details of potential participants will be collected by the primary researcher (Monika Todorova Todorova) either through seeking out publicly available contact information through their verified public social media accounts or through the potential participant emailing the primary researcher directly. The primary researcher will then follow up with individuals interested to participate with the Information Sheet (if not already provided) and Consent form with a standardised reply email and will subsequently schedule an interview if the participant wishes to be included in the study.

How will potential participants be invited to participate?

Potential participants sought by the primary researcher will be invited to participate through receiving an initial standardised email inviting them to partake within the study. If the participant expresses interest, they will be subsequently provided with a standardised response email with the relevant Information Sheet and Consent form so they can confirm their willingness to join the study as a participant.

If participants were referred to the primary researcher by another party and subsequently express interest to partake within the study, the potential participants will receive a standardised response email with the information Sheet (if not already provided) and Consent Form attached.

How much time will potential participants have to consider the invitation?

Two weeks.

How will potential participants respond to the invitation?

Participants can respond to the initial invitation via email and confirm their interest and willingness to participate by completing the Consent Form and returning it to the primary researcher. If a potential participant does not provide a response within two weeks, a follow up email will be sent, after which it will be assumed that the potential participant does not wish to participate in the study and no further contact in terms of the study will occur.

How will potential participants give consent?

Potential participants will give consent by having first read the Information Sheet provided in the primary researcher's standard response email and then having signed and returned the AUTEK approved provided Consent Form. A physical copy will also be provided at the time of conducting the interview.

How and when will the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria be applied?

The inclusion criteria are shared through the Information Sheet that each potential participant will receive within their standardised response email. The inclusion criteria will be applied by the primary researcher when confirming an individual's interest in participation. The inclusion criteria will additionally be applied within the consent forms that each participant needs to sign and return to the primary researcher.

Will there be any follow up invitations for participants?

A follow up invitation email will be sent at the end of the two-week period to take any account for an email that might have been missed by the potential participant. Further follow up invitations will not be used to ensure no discomfort or embarrassment is caused for potential participants that do not wish to partake in the study.

Appendix Bc: Standard Email Template

Dear [Participant]

My name is Monika Todorova and I am reaching out to you as I have identified that you would be a suitable interview participant for my Masters of Communication Studies thesis, as I am currently a student in the School of Communication Studies at AUT. The research project is entitled "Gen Z Fashion on TikTok: Navigating Identity Perceptions and Revisiting Simmel's Paradoxical Fashion Theory". The research aims to explore how fashion is communicated and understood amongst fashion focused individuals such as current students and those connected to the industry that are part of the Generation Z demographic in New Zealand, investigating the role and influence of TikTok within the fashion decision making process.

This research is also concerned with how highly fashion conscious Generation Zers perceive their own identities in terms of fashion whilst using the app. Lastly, this research study analyses the relevance of Simmel's fashion paradox theory, seeing if there is a present tension between individuality versus collective identity and if there is, how it is experienced and navigated by Gen Zers whilst using TikTok.

If you are interested in participating, your contribution to this study involves:

- A face-to-face interview within a quiet location of your workplace or an online interview. The interview is expected to last no longer than one-hour. The interview will address your experiences, perspectives and thoughts on the topics of fashion communication, adoption, TikTok, identity perceptions and the duality of individuality and conformity.

Participation of this study is completely voluntary and you will receive a \$50 token of appreciation for your time, with snacks included for in-person interviews. If you are interested in partaking within this study I will provide you an Information Sheet and Consent form for you to return and we can organise an appropriate time for your interview.

I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Kindest regards,

Monika Todorova

Appendix Bd: Standard Email Reply Template

Dear [Participant]

Thank you so much for expressing your interest in partaking in the research project entitled "Gen Z Fashion on TikTok: Navigating Identity Perceptions and Revisiting Simmel's Paradoxical Fashion Theory". My name is Monika Todorova and I am completing this research in aim of achieving a Masters of Communication Studies qualification as a student in the School of Communication Studies at AUT.

This research study aims to explore how fashion is communicated and understood amongst fashion focused individuals such as students and those connected to the industry that are part of the Generation Z demographic in New Zealand, investigating the role and influence of TikTok within the fashion decision making process. This research is also concerned with how highly fashion conscious Generation Zers perceive their own identities in terms of fashion whilst using the app. Lastly, this research study analyses the relevance of Simmel's fashion paradox theory, seeing if there is a present tension between individuality versus collective identity and if there is, how it is experienced and navigated by Gen Zers whilst using TikTok.

Your requested participation and contribution to this study involves:

- A face-to-face interview, that is expected to last no longer than one-hour. The interview will address your experiences, perspectives and thoughts on the topics of fashion communication, adoption, TikTok, identity perceptions and the duality of individuality and conformity.

Participation of this study is completely voluntary, and you can partake in this study through viewing the attached Information Sheet and filling out and returning the Consent Form. The Information sheet will additionally outline the ethical considerations of the study and the steps for raising concerns if necessary.

I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Kindest regards,

Monika Todorova

Appendix Be: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

14 September 2024

Project Title:

Gen Z Fashion on TikTok: Navigating Identity Perceptions and Revisiting Simmel's Paradoxical Fashion Theory

An Invitation

My name is Monika Todorova, and I am a Master of Communication Studies student at AUT. I am inviting you to participate in my research study which will aid in the completion of my thesis. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw any time prior to the completion of the data collection.

What is the purpose of this research?

Social media, in particular TikTok has become an ever-growing domain in our lives as Generation Zers, which sees the opportunity for further research on how fashion is communicated and adopted, perceptions of identity and the 'self' online.

This research aims to analyse how fashion is communicated and understood amongst fashion focused individuals such as current students, industry workers and influencers of the Generation Z demographic in New Zealand, investigating the role and influence of TikTok within the fashion decision making process. Additionally, this study seeks to analyse how this specific demographic perceive their own identities in terms of fashion whilst using the app. Lastly, this research study analyses the relevance of Simmel's fashion paradox theory, exploring if there is a tension between individuality versus collective identity and if there is, how it is experienced and navigated by this specific demographic through the application TikTok.

The findings of this research will be used to complete a master's thesis.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

As someone within the Generation Z demographic who is heavily interested and involved within the topic of fashion and uses TikTok as a form of consuming fashion content, you have either received this information sheet as I have identified you as someone who can talk to me about your thoughts and experiences with the topic of fashion, personal identity perceptions and TikTok or you have possibly received this document because someone has passed it on to you. You also meet the below selection criteria:

- You live in Auckland, New Zealand full-time
- Currently studying fashion at a Tertiary Institution OR have a personal connection to the fashion industry
- Are part of the older Generation Z cohort (Ages 20 - 26)
- Use the application TikTok as a form of fashion content consumption and engagement

You have been identified and invited to partake in this research because of your knowledge and experience of the topic at hand as either a fashion design student or someone connected in the fashion industry.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Please confirm your willingness to partake in this research through emailing the primary researcher directly [vnh7661@autuni.ac.nz] with a signed Consent form. You will be required to complete the Consent Form that is provided alongside this Information Sheet. A physical copy will also be provided at the time of the interview process.

Your participation in this research is completely your choice. You can withdraw from the study at any time before the findings have been produced. Confidentiality is ensured through removing any identifiable information and giving you a pseudonym.

What will happen in this research?

If you decide to participate in this research study, this project involves interviewing you for one hour of your time to understand your experiences, thoughts and opinions on fashion communication, the influence of TikTok on your fashion decision making process, your own identity perceptions and your opinions on the fashion identities of online Gen Zer's. These interviews will take place at your location of study, work or online. I will then transcribe your interview and analyse it, searching for themes that can assist in understanding the highly fashion-conscious Gen Zer in New Zealand more, and the online fashion TikTok landscape.

What are the discomforts and risks?

There should be no discomforts or risks throughout this interview process. You are perfectly welcome to not include any experiences or thoughts that make you feel discomfort.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If you are feeling any levels of discomfort, you can stop the interview process whenever you deem appropriate.

What are the benefits?

As the interview participant, the main benefit of this research study is getting to dissect a topic that is centred around your interests and getting to share your experiences and thoughts to assist in gaining a better understanding of online fashion adoption, the influence of TikTok, what Generation Z experiences and the nuances of identity. Throughout the interview process, you may uncover interesting aspects of yourself that you would have never fully realised, and even gain a deeper understanding of yourself as you study to become someone eventually involved in the world of fashion yourself or are already involved within.

This research is being conducted as part of completing a thesis, which will contribute to the completion of a master's qualification. Through completing this research, I additionally hope to gain a deeper understanding on this area as I am deeply interested and passionate about this topic.

How will my privacy be protected?

After the interview process is completed and I have transcribed your interview into writing, I will remove your personal name from the transcript and any markers of your identity or others mentioned, utilising a pseudonym for yours and their privacy. Any information that you share that is considered confidential will not be used within the research without permission granted first from you.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

Just one hour of your time.

What timeframe do I have to consider this invitation?

You'll have up to one month of receiving this invitation to consider whether you want to participate in this research study.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

After submission of the thesis, a one-to-two-page summary PDF of the findings will be provided for each participant sent from the researcher via email if desired.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr. Rufus McEwan, rufus.mcewan@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext. 6895.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext. 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are

also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Monika Todorova, ynh7661@autuni.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr. Rufus McEwan, rufus.mcewan@aut.ac.nz (+649) 921 9999 ext. 6895.

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 7th October 2024,
AUTEC Reference number 24/301.**

Appendix Bf: Consent Form



Consent Form

Project title: **Gen Z Fashion on TikTok: Navigating Identity Perceptions and Revisiting Simmel's Paradoxical Fashion Theory**
Project Supervisor: **Dr. Rufus McEwan**
Researcher: **Monika Todorova**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 14 September 2024.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 7th October 2024, AUTEK Reference number 24/301.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix Bg: Interview Protocol



Interview Protocol

Project title: **Gen Z Fashion on TikTok: Navigating Identity Perceptions and Revisiting Simmel's Paradoxical Fashion Theory**
Project Supervisor: **Dr. Rufus McEwan**
Researcher: **Monika Todorova**

Who will conduct research interviews and be responsible for collecting data?

Research interviews will be conducted by the primary researcher Monika Todorova. The primary researcher will conduct the interviews, record the data and clean any identifying content before sharing the audio transcript with their primary supervisor.

How will interviews be recorded?

Every interview will be audio recorded using dedicated audio recording devices. As it is good practice to utilise two recording devices at once due to possible audio recording failure, the primary researcher will ensure two forms of audio recording are employed. Interviews will only be recorded with the aim of accuracy, with the final recordings not being shared with any individual other than the primary supervisor.

How will interviews be stored?

All interview recordings will be stored on AUT provided cloud storage (OneDrive) accessible only by the primary researcher and supervisor.

How will interview recordings be processed?

Interviews will be processed through using the Microsoft speech-to-text function, and then edited by the primary researcher to make necessary tweaks upon a second.

Where will the interviews take place?

The interviews will be conducted in person or online. The primary researcher will interview all participants within the interviewee's natural environment, either where they study on Campus or within a quiet location in their place of work.



Indicative Questions:

How do you personally understand fashion?

Can you describe how you believe fashion communicates to others?

As someone who is studying fashion, how does this impact your understanding of fashion?

OR As someone who works in fashion, how does this impact your understanding of fashion?

As someone who is Generation Z, how does your sense of belonging to this generation group impact your understanding of fashion?

Talk to me about how you feel about the state of fashion online today

Tell me about how you use TikTok for fashion content

How do you feel about TikTok and its influence on contemporary fashion?

Does TikTok have any influence on your fashion decision making process?

If yes, can you describe how it influences your fashion decision making process and explain to what extent?

If not, does any other online platform influence your fashion decision making process?

How do you perceive your own identity whilst using TikTok?

What are the ways in which you feel TikTok represents your own identity?

Tell me about your opinions on individuality and following trends

Do you think the notion of individuality and following trends is still prevalent today?

How do you personally experience individuality and following trends?

Do you think TikTok has had any effect on individuality and following trends?

Appendix C: Sample of Thematic Analysis

