

Shaped by Social Media and Microtrend Culture?

UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON

LONDON COLLEGE OF FASHION

Fashion Business School

From Subculture to Scroll Culture: A Qualitative Exploration of Microtrend Culture's

Impact on Fashion Identity

by

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Thesis for the degree of Bachelor of Science (Honors) Psychology of Fashion

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28.05.2025

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ABSTRACT

The rapid rise of social media-driven microtrends has significantly altered how individuals engage with fashion, influencing identity, individuality, and subcultural belonging in digital contexts. This study examined how accelerated trend cycles on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram impact fashion consumers' self-expression, perceived authenticity, and engagement with subcultural fashion values.

A qualitative, exploratory design was employed. Ten participants aged 18–30 were recruited through opportunity sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who actively engage with fashion content online. Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, providing detailed insights into participants' lived experiences and identity negotiation within digital fashion environments.

Three overarching themes were identified: the psychological impact of social media and trend saturation; the tension between authentic self-expression and aesthetic conformity; and the evolution and erosion of subcultural identity in microtrend culture. Results indicated that many participants experienced emotional fatigue and disconnection from their personal style due to the pressures of algorithm-driven trends. While some participants found creative affirmation online, others reported identity instability, performative pressure, and symbolic dilution of subcultural meaning.

These findings highlight the complex psychological consequences of digital trend culture. Although social media can support creativity and exploration, it may also challenge autonomy, individuality, and symbolic resistance through fashion. This study contributes to a growing understanding of how fashion, identity, and social meaning are shaped in algorithmic spaces.

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I, *Annabelle Hall*, certify that:

- This is an original and individual piece of work and no part of this has been written by anyone else.
- I have acknowledged (appropriately referenced using the APA referencing system) all sources and citations.
- No section of this assignment has been plagiarised.
- This work has not been submitted for any other assessment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Annabelle Hall', with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

22-05-2003

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AI USE DISCLOSURE

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT by OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com>, between April and May 2025 to support the development and refinement of this dissertation. The tool was used to assist with language clarity, academic tone, structural guidance, and formatting support. The use of AI was limited to developmental support and all output was reviewed, adapted, and critically edited by me to reflect my own academic voice, interpretation, and analysis.

The prompts used include, but are not limited to:

- *"Can you give me pointers on how to format into APA?"* (26 April 2025)
- *"How should I format a reflexive thematic analysis results section in APA 7?"* (19 May)
- *"What do I put in the List of Figures section if I only have a thematic map?"* (25 May 2025)
- *"Can you check spelling and grammar?"* (27 May 2025)

The tool was not used to generate unedited or final content, conduct analysis, write participant reflections, or replace independent academic judgment. My work reflects personal interpretation and critical engagement throughout the dissertation process.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

27-05-2003

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the individuals who contributed to the completion of the dissertation.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Young-Jin Hur, for his invaluable support, feedback and encouragement throughout this project.

Thank you to Mason Silveira, unit leader, for providing clear academic guidance and structure throughout the module.

I would also like to thank my boyfriend, Cole Scott, for helping me to persevere through till the end.

Finally, I am especially grateful to my parents, Michelle Hall and Simon Hall whose unwavering support, encouragement, and love made this project possible.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

The fashion landscape has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, largely due to the growing influence of digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. A key shift within this space is the emergence of microtrends, short-lived, visually driven aesthetics that rise to prominence rapidly before fading just as quickly (Hush Digital, 2024). While these trends encourage visual experimentation, they also raise concerns about their impact on identity, individuality, and cultural depth in fashion.

Historically, fashion subcultures such as punk, goth, and rave have served as powerful forms of expression, enabling individuals to communicate group identity, resist dominant norms, and align with shared values (Hebdige, 1979). These styles often functioned as symbolic languages. However, the accelerated pace of trend cycles, now shaped by algorithmic systems and commercial incentives, risks diluting the symbolic and ideological meaning once embedded in subcultural dress (Polhemus, 1994; Muggleton, 2002).

This is particularly relevant for Generation Z (born mid-1990s to early 2010s), the first generation raised entirely in a digital environment. Although Gen Z is widely regarded as valuing authenticity and self-expression (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), their fashion behaviours often reflect the competing pressures of maintaining visibility, keeping up with trends, and conforming to algorithmic preferences (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). This emerging tension between individuality and aesthetic conformity increasingly characterises fashion identity in digital spaces.

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In this context, fashion becomes less about self-expression and more about performative visibility, shaped by the logic of algorithms. This evolution raises key questions for fashion psychology: How do individuals navigate personal style in a climate dominated by digital metrics? And what becomes of subcultural meaning when visual trends are rapidly commodified and recycled?

Although existing cultural research has begun to explore these themes, there remains a lack of psychological insight into how consumers personally experience the pressures and contradictions of microtrend culture. This study aims to address that gap by investigating how Gen Z and other digital fashion users perceive, negotiate, and relate to identity and subcultural meaning within fast-moving online fashion environments.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate how social media and microtrend culture shape fashion consumers' identity, individuality, and engagement with subcultural meaning, particularly in the context of accelerated digital trend cycles.

To guide this investigation, the study sets out the following objectives:

1. To examine how individuals experience and define microtrends on social media.
2. To explore how exposure to digital trends influences identity, individuality, and perceived autonomy in fashion choices.
3. To investigate how users navigate the balance between self-expression and conformity within algorithmically driven platforms.
4. To understand how microtrend culture affects the perceived relevance and symbolic meaning of fashion subcultures.

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Overview of Methodology

To capture these experiences, a qualitative research design was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who actively engage with fashion on social media. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was used to interpret participants' narratives, allowing for rich insights into the ways identity, creativity, and resistance are shaped in microtrend-saturated spaces.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1 – Introduction: Provides the research context, rationale, aims, and structure.
- Chapter 2 – Literature Review: Reviews existing literature on microtrends, digital fashion identity, and subcultural meaning.
- Chapter 3 – Methodology: Outlines the research design, participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis approach.
- Chapter 4 – Results: Presents findings organised by theme and subtheme.
- Chapter 5 – Discussion and Conclusion: Interprets the results, discusses limitations, and offers directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram now shape not only how fashion is consumed but how it evolves (Rocamora, 2017; Pham, 2021). A key development within this space is microtrend culture, fast-moving, niche aesthetics that gain rapid popularity and fade just as quickly. Unlike traditional subcultures grounded in shared identity and resistance, microtrends prioritise novelty, visual impact, and algorithmic traction. TikTok's algorithm, as Bhandari and Bimo (2023) argue, accelerates aesthetic turnover by rewarding virality over ideological substance.

This acceleration increases pressure on users to constantly adapt their appearance, shifting fashion's function from self-expression to digital performance, geared more towards algorithmic reward than personal meaning. These dynamics present significant psychological challenges, particularly for younger users navigating identity online. As Belk (2013) notes, digital fashion environments blur the line between authenticity and performance. While some find these spaces creatively liberating, others experience constraint, as algorithmic norms suppress individuality and promote aesthetic conformity (Yang et al., 2018).

Moreover, these dynamics reshape the function of fashion subcultures. Traditionally, sites of symbolic resistance and community (Hebdige, 1979), subcultural aesthetics are now increasingly commodified into fleeting content. Santaolalla-Rueda and Fernández-Muñoz (2024) argue that algorithmic platforms strip this aesthetics of ideological meaning, repackaging them for mainstream appeal.

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Together, these shifts raise critical questions about fashion's evolving role in constructing identity, enabling resistance, and sustaining individuality. The following sections explore these questions by examining trend cycles, identity tension, and the symbolic dilution of subcultures through psychological and cultural lenses.

The Acceleration of Fashion Trend Cycles in Digital Spaces

Historically, fashion followed seasonal rhythms dictated by runways and retail calendars. Today, this model has been disrupted. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram now drive a perpetual trend cycle, where styles emerge, peak, and fade within weeks (Pham, 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2023). Kawamura (2005) views fashion as a cultural system shaped by institutional forces; in the digital age, algorithms have assumed this gatekeeping role. By privileging novelty and viral appeal, platforms dictate what styles gain traction, compressing the traditional fashion cycle.

At the heart of this is microtrend culture ephemeral aesthetics such as “cottagecore” or “clean girl” that gain rapid visibility. Algorithms, as Bucher (2021) notes, amplify certain content while marginalising others, guiding users toward dominant styles and away from alternative expression. This repeated exposure influences not just consumption but self-concept.

Belk's (2013) extended self theory helps explain how digital profiles and wardrobes become entwined with identity. Pérez-Torres (2024) supports this, framing social media as a “digital mirror” where users receive constant aesthetic feedback, shaping self-perception through likes and comments. While this may inspire exploration, it can also foster

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dependence on external validation and hinder the formation of a stable, intrinsic sense of style.

Psychologically, this tension is framed by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasises the need for autonomy. Yet in algorithmic spaces, users often choose styles for approval rather than preference. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) further explains how constant comparison with idealised aesthetics undermines identity clarity and encourages mimicry. Similarly, Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity theory highlights how well-being increases when appearance aligns with self-concept, a harmony often disrupted by fast-paced, approval-seeking trends.

Although social media democratises access to fashion, its algorithmic logic can restrict creativity, prioritising uniformity over originality. This narrowing of identity and choice sets the stage for the next section, which examines how individuals attempt to express selfhood within trend-saturated environments.

Identity, Individuality, and the Tension Between Expression and Conformity

Fashion has long been a medium for both self-expression and social belonging. Crane (2000) and Davis (1992) describe clothing as a visual language through which individuals signal identity and group affiliation. Kaiser (2012) further highlights fashion's role in expressing personal values. From a psychological perspective, Self-Concept Theory suggests individuals strive for coherence between their inner self-image and outward appearance (Sirgy, 1982).

However, social media complicates this alignment. In digital spaces, the pressure to remain relevant often encourages performative rather than authentic styling. Higgins' (1987)

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Self-Discrepancy Theory illustrates the tension that arises when individuals feel misaligned with their digitally curated selves. The result is a growing disconnect between how users see themselves and how they feel compelled to present.

This reflects a broader dynamic identified by Simmel (1957), who described fashion as balancing individuality and conformity. Brewer's (1991) Optimal Distinctiveness Theory echoes this tension: individuals want to be unique, yet also to fit in. On platforms like TikTok, however, maintaining this balance proves difficult. As Bhandari and Bimo (2023) observe, trending aesthetics often follow rigid visual formulas. To gain visibility, users replicate popular styles, limiting opportunities for original expression.

This demand for aesthetic consistency is sustained through what Abidin (2016) terms "visibility labour" the ongoing effort to appear polished and trend-aware. Such pressure is evident in consumption habits: Amed et al. (2019) found that many young consumers avoid outfit repetition online, reinforcing a culture of disposability and rapid trend turnover.

These pressures can trigger what Bhandari and Bimo (2023) describe as "aesthetic anxiety" a fear of appearing outdated or off-brand. Despite seeming like a space for creativity, algorithmic environments often reward sameness. Abidin (2016) notes that users perform "individuality" within narrow aesthetic limits, generating the illusion of freedom while reinforcing dominant codes. What marks the current moment as unique is the speed, scale, and precision of this influence.

The psychological consequences are especially potent during emerging adulthood, a period Arnett (2000) characterises by identity exploration. In trend-saturated contexts, individuals may struggle to define their style autonomously, leading to confusion, insecurity, or disengagement. This tension is further complicated by body image issues. Tiggemann and

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Lacey (2009) note that clothing is often used to manage self-esteem. When trends promote narrow beauty ideals, fashion becomes a source of anxiety rather than empowerment.

Thus, the tension between authentic expression and trend conformity reflects a deeper negotiation of identity. While digital platforms amplify exposure and inspiration, they also constrain self-expression by rewarding algorithmic desirability. These forces increasingly reshape fashion's symbolic power not only as a form of self-expression but also as a means of resistance. This opens the way to the next discussion: how subcultural meaning is transformed in the age of microtrend culture.

Subcultures, Symbolic Resistance, and the Algorithmic Repackaging of Meaning

Subcultures have historically offered spaces for ideological resistance and identity formation. Hebdige (1979) famously argued that subcultural dress whether punk, goth, or mod, embodied political defiance, shared values, and community. These styles were more than aesthetic, they were symbolic codes of opposition.

However, in today's digital landscape, these meanings are increasingly diluted. Platforms like TikTok commodify subcultural aesthetics, stripping them of their ideological roots and repackaging them as fleeting trends (Pham, 2021). Formerly resistant styles such as "soft grunge" or "e-girl" circulate widely online with little reference to their original context, reducing them to visual commodities.

This aesthetic decontextualisation undermines the psychological benefits subcultures have traditionally offered. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) argues that group affiliation fosters belonging and stability. When subcultures become short-lived or superficial, individuals may lose access to the community and meaning such groups once

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provided. Instead of anchoring identity, these fleeting styles can leave users feeling disoriented and isolated.

Santaolalla-Rueda and Fernández-Muñoz (2024) describe digital collectives such as “Potaxies” and “Fifes,” which mimic the visual cohesion of subcultures without shared ideology. These groups prioritise aesthetic performance over political alignment, reflecting a broader shift from collective resistance to individualised branding.

This shift erodes fashion's role as a tool for symbolic rebellion. Resistance Theory (Jetten & Hornsey, 2011) suggests that opposing mainstream norms supports autonomy and self-coherence. Yet, in algorithmic culture, subversive styles are quickly absorbed and monetised. What once challenged dominant aesthetics is now recycled for commercial gain, neutralising its oppositional power.

Rather than resisting norms, users often conform to them to remain visible. Marwick (2013) argues that within the attention economy, fashion becomes a performance strategically curated to maintain digital status. In this context, fashion shifts from defiant self-expression to a mechanism of alignment, driven by algorithmic reward.

Muggleton (2000) notes that contemporary style communities often reflect postmodern values of irony, fluidity, and surface play rather than deep ideological commitment. Subcultural affiliation becomes ephemeral, aestheticised, and commercially repurposed. The result is a decline in fashion's capacity to symbolise resistance and enable identity-rooted rebellion.

These transformations raise important psychological questions. As subcultural meaning dissolves into content, what remains of fashion's ability to offer identity security,

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collective resistance, or meaningful belonging? These issues will be explored further in this study through the lived experiences of fashion consumers navigating digital trend culture.

Conclusion and Research Gap

This review demonstrates that social media and microtrend culture are profoundly reshaping the ways individuals engage with fashion and construct identity. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram do not merely influence fashion consumption; they accelerate trend cycles, intensify aesthetic pressures, and contribute to emotional fatigue and identity instability.

Drawing on key theories including Self-Concept Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Identity Theory this review has shown how digital fashion environments compromise autonomy, blur the line between personal style and public performance, and challenge fashion's traditional role as a medium of symbolic resistance. Although social media can facilitate creativity and visibility, its algorithmic logic often rewards conformity over originality, making expressions of individuality increasingly difficult to sustain.

While cultural research has begun to explore the dynamics of digital fashion, there remains a significant gap in psychological research examining how consumers personally experience the pressures of microtrend culture. Microtrends, in particular, have emerged as a distinct force within fashion, yet there is little to no empirical research that has examined their specific psychological impact, especially in relation to fashion identity, authenticity, and subcultural meaning. This dissertation addresses these gaps by asking:

1. How do social media and accelerated trend cycles influence fashion consumers' emotional connection to style and perceived autonomy in fashion choices?

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2. How is fashion identity negotiated between self-expression and pressure to conform to dominant online aesthetics?
3. How does microtrend culture shape the meaning and role of subcultures in constructing fashion identity and enabling symbolic resistance?

By centring these questions, this research explores how social media and microtrend culture psychologically shape fashion consumers' individuality, fashion identity, and connection to subcultural meaning, ultimately offering deeper insight into how fashion operates as both a mode of self-expression and a source of psychological conflict in the digital age.

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METHODS**Research Design**

There is growing interest in how social media influences fashion consumption and identity, particularly among young people. However, limited research has explored how fast-paced digital trend cycles may impact individuality and expressions of resistance through fashion. While subcultures have historically been rooted in rebellion and group identity, their presence in today's online spaces appears increasingly fragmented and aestheticised.

This study aims to explore whether microtrends are contributing to a decline in individuality and subcultural expression in the digital age. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture in-depth personal experiences and reflections, allowing for a richer understanding of how participants navigate fashion, identity, and social meaning in a trend-saturated environment. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate detailed, open responses while offering the flexibility to explore emerging ideas.

Participants

Ten participants were recruited using opportunity sampling and word of mouth via personal networks. Recruitment materials were also circulated on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, targeting individuals who actively engage in digital fashion spaces. This approach was intended to reach participants likely to interact with microtrends and algorithm-influenced content.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged between 18 and 30, regularly use fashion-related social media platforms (e.g., TikTok or Instagram), and engage with fashion

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in some capacity whether as consumers, content creators, or trend observers. This demographic was selected for its relevance to contemporary discussions on fashion identity, individuality, and the influence of social media microtrends (Ofcom, 2024). Participants of any gender were welcomed to reflect the diversity of experiences in fashion today.

All participants provided informed consent and were allowed to choose their own pseudonyms to enhance participant engagement and to protect their identities. See Table 1 for an overview of participant demographics.

Table.1*Participant demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
Hank	21	Male	White British
Shera	22	Female	White British
Serenity	24	Female	Mixed – White Dutch and Black Somali
Bryce	18	Male	White British
Jamie Lee	23	Female	White British
Catwoman	22	Female	White British
George Harrison	22	Female	White British
Flowertot	30	Female	White British
Larry	23	Male	White British
Helon	25	Female	White British

Table 1

Note. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities.

Materials

This study used a qualitative, exploratory approach to investigate participants' perceptions of fashion identity, individuality, and the influence of microtrends. An exploratory design was appropriate for capturing rich, subjective insights on a topic that remains under-researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

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A self-designed, semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the study's aims and key themes identified in the literature review. The guide was reviewed by academic supervisors and piloted informally to ensure clarity, relevance, and flow.

The interview schedule was divided into four thematic sections:

1. Personal Style, Identity, and Self-Concept – explored how participants perceive their personal style, whether it reflects their values or personality, and how social influences affect their fashion identity.
2. Microtrends and Social Media Influence – examined how participants define microtrends, their experiences with fast-changing trends online, and the role of algorithms and influencers.
3. Subcultures and Fashion Communities – explored participants' views on subcultures in the digital age, the distinction between trend and identity, and how online communities shape or dilute meaning.
4. Emotional and Psychological Impact – investigated how participants emotionally respond to microtrends, whether they feel pressure to conform, and how trend fatigue or identity conflict may emerge.

Each section contained open-ended questions designed to prompt reflective, personal responses. Follow-up questions and probes were used flexibly depending on participant engagement. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve authenticity. This ensured that participants' language and meaning were captured accurately, which is essential in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview schedule can be found in Appendix A.

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Procedure

Potential participants received a Participant Information Sheet outlining the purpose of the research, their rights, and how their data would be handled. Written consent was obtained prior to participation.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in a quiet, agreed-upon location or online via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and followed a conversational format to encourage open, comfortable dialogue. Participants were reminded of their right to pause or withdraw at any point.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of participants' responses (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). The researcher used verbal and non-verbal cues to build rapport, and follow-up questions were asked when appropriate to explore emerging ideas. A neutral stance was maintained throughout to allow participants to articulate their views freely.

After the interview, participants were provided with a Debrief Form reiterating their rights and offering contact details for follow-up queries. They were informed they could withdraw their data within 7 days of the interview. Follow-up interviews may be considered where thematic clarification is needed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to interpret common theme within the data. This six-phase method involved:

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1. Familiarisation: Repeated reading of the transcript to fully immerse in the data.
2. Initial Coding: Coding interesting or relevant features using a primarily inductive approach.
3. Theme Development: Grouping codes into preliminary themes and identifying links between them.
4. Reviewing Themes: Refining themes to ensure coherence and relation to the research question.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Articulating the essence of each theme.
6. Producing the Report: Illustrating analytic claims with verbatim quotes to maintain transparency.

This process was not linear but reflexive and recursive, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019). The researcher regularly revisited earlier stages, such as refining codes and returning to transcripts to ensure that emerging themes were grounded in the data. The focus remained on generating meaning-rich patterns rather than seeking thematic consensus or frequency alone.

Manual coding was carried out using digital tools, specifically Microsoft Word and Excel, to organise codes and themes. This approach was selected for its accessibility and allowed the researcher to remain closely engaged with the data. Initial codes were developed with reference to the research questions and relevant literature, while also allowing for unanticipated insights to emerge. This iterative, reflexive process supported the development of rich, nuanced interpretations that reflect the complexity of participants' lived experiences.

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Research Ethics

The study adheres to the University of the Arts London (UAL) Code of Practice on Research Ethics and the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). Ethical approval was obtained from the course supervisor prior to recruitment.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw, assured of confidentiality, and asked to provide informed consent before participating. All data were anonymised and securely stored on password-protected devices. While the topics were not considered sensitive, a list of well-being resources was included in the debrief materials in case participants experienced any distress.

Special care was taken to ensure transparency, especially around the power dynamics of the researcher-participant relationship. Clear language was used in consent and debrief forms, and participants were reminded that their responses would be treated with respect and sensitivity.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important part of qualitative research, particularly when the researcher plays a central role in data collection and interpretation (Berger, 2015). As a white British woman in my early twenties with a personal and academic interest in fashion psychology, I shared some similarities with many of my participants. I believe this common ground helped build rapport and encourage open dialogue, particularly around identity and digital fashion culture.

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I also acknowledge that my academic interests in subcultures, digital fashion, and identity may have shaped how I interpreted participant narratives. To manage this, I regularly reflected on my positionality throughout the research process. I aimed to centre participant voices as much as possible, while remaining transparent about my interpretive role. This aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2021) view that subjectivity should not be eliminated in qualitative research, but rather engaged with critically and reflexively.

By maintaining transparency and closely aligning the analysis with participant narratives, I aimed to produce a credible and ethically robust exploration of how microtrends affect individuality, identity, and symbolic resistance within digital fashion culture.

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RESULTS

The aim of this study was to explore how social media and microtrend culture psychologically shape fashion consumers' identity, individuality, and relationship to subcultural values. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) approach, using ten in-depth interviews with fashion consumers.

The findings address the following research questions:

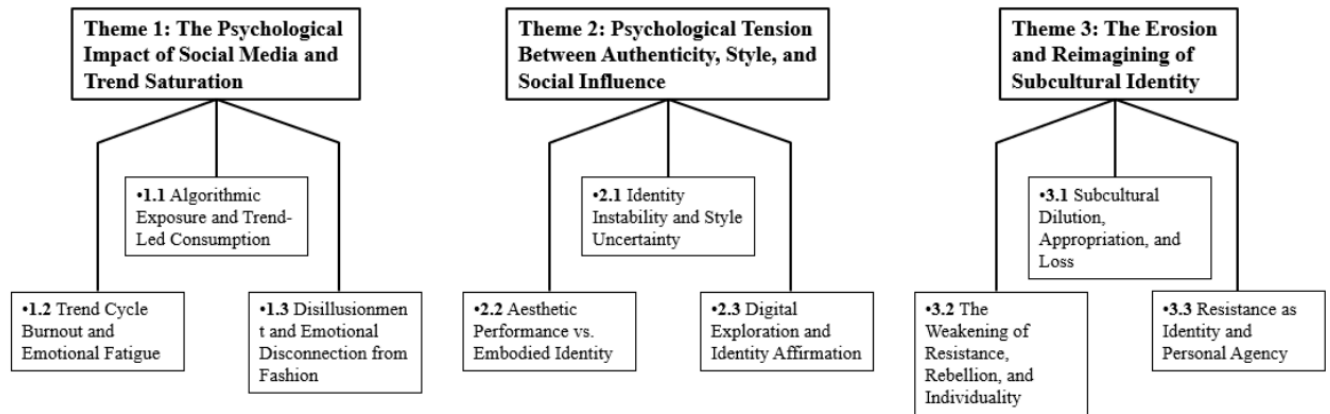
1. How do social media and accelerated trend cycles influence fashion consumers' emotional connection to style and perceived autonomy in fashion choices?
2. How is fashion identity negotiated between self-expression and pressure to conform to dominant online aesthetics?
3. How does microtrend culture shape the meaning and role of subcultures in constructing fashion identity and enabling symbolic resistance?

Three key themes and nine subthemes were developed to answer the research questions, each examining how digital fashion culture influences identity formation, trend engagement, aesthetic conformity, and symbolic subcultural resistance.

The results are presented theme by theme, with each subtheme supported by illustrative participant quotes. Interpretation remains grounded in the data, highlighting the emotional and psychological tensions surrounding personal style, social media exposure, conformity, and evolving subcultural meaning. A thematic map summarising the themes and subthemes is presented in Figure 1.

Figure.1

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*Thematic Analysis Map***Thematic Map: The Influence of Social Media and Microtrend Culture on Fashion Identity and Subcultural Expression****Theme 1: The Psychological Impact of Social Media and Trend Saturation**

In line with RQ1, this theme explores how algorithmic exposure and accelerated trend cycles affect fashion consumers' emotional connection to style and perceived autonomy. Participants described the psychological effects of trend fatigue, disconnection from fashion, and algorithm-driven consumption.

Subtheme 1.1: Algorithmic Exposure's Influence on Trend-Led Consumption

Eight out of ten participants described being influenced by social media algorithms and repeated exposure to microtrends, which subtly shaped their consumption choices and aesthetic preferences.

"The stuff I interact with more, the microtrends I engage with keep appearing, so it influences me to want to buy them."

(Hank)

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Hank's reflection highlights how the algorithm's reinforcement of visual content can subtly steer consumption habits over time. Engagement becomes a feedback loop that turns exposure into temptation and, eventually, into action.

"I wouldn't have bought it had TikTok not shown it to me 150 times."

(Jamie)

Jamie's comment reinforces this effect, showing how persistent exposure can override personal intent and lead to purchases that feel more driven by external algorithms than internal preferences.

Subtheme 1.2: Emotional Fatigue and Trend Cycle Burnout

7 out of 10 participants described the emotional toll of constantly being exposed to new trends online. Many felt overwhelmed by how quickly styles emerged and disappeared, leading to frustration and decision fatigue.

"It gets so overwhelming because they do just come and go so quickly. And then you end up at home with a wardrobe full of clothes that you don't like because they're trends from like four months ago... and you feel like a gimmick to wear them."

(Catwoman)

Catwoman's account reflects the stress of trying to keep up with fast fashion cycles, where purchases quickly feel outdated and unreflective of one's current preferences.

"There's so many microtrends... every year, it gets more and more, more and more. I just think everything fashion, music, any form of art you know, the sea level's rising in it all. It's getting very hard to keep up with."

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(Larry)

Larry's metaphor captures the sense of mental overload that participants associated with trend saturation. Rather than enjoying fashion, many described feeling mentally drained by the effort to stay current.

Subtheme 1.3: Disillusionment and Emotional Disconnection from Fashion

Nine out of ten participants described feeling increasingly disconnected from fashion as microtrends accelerated. Styles that once felt personal lost meaning, leaving individuals frustrated and detached from their clothing. Fashion, once a source of confidence and creativity, began to feel disposable and hollow.

"Really upset actually. It makes me feel like I'm watching the decline of my own personal style play out before my eyes... I was doing it because it was making me feel comfortable and confident and yeah, really annoyed."

(Flowertot)

Flowertot's reflection highlights the disappointment of seeing once-authentic style reduced to a passing trend, eroding its personal value.

"I think we've lost this connection to our own personal style because everything moves so quickly. So we don't cherish things and we don't buy with intention."

(Flowertot)

This quote emphasises how fast trend cycles discourage emotional investment in fashion, replacing lasting expression with short-term relevance.

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Theme 2: Psychological Tension Between Personal Style, Trend Conformity, and Authenticity

In line with RQ1 and RQ2, this theme explores how fashion consumers psychologically navigate the tension between authentic self-expression and the pressure to align with dominant online aesthetics. Across three subthemes, participants reflected on feelings of identity instability, performative dressing, and moments of style affirmation through digital platforms.

Subtheme 2.1: Identity Instability and Style Uncertainty

6 out of 10 participants commonly reported feeling uncertain about their personal style, influenced by fast-moving trends and fear of social judgement. This tension often led to self-doubt and hesitation in fashion choices.

“And you’ll have negative connotations to a trend or outfit that you feel very much is authentically you. So that’s almost a way of society shitting on your actual identity being like, ‘Oh, your identity is last season. Your identity is this,’ and it makes you feel like confused and sad and scared and, you know, wanting to change yourself constantly.”

(Catwoman)

Catwoman describes the emotional impact of feeling invalidated when once-authentic styles fall out of favour, undermining personal expression.

“I’ll see something cool that I like and want to copy it, or I’ll see something I think I like but lots of people don’t, and that might make me not want to wear it.”

(Hank)

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Hank highlights the everyday pressure to conform, where perceived popularity shapes individual fashion decisions. Together, these accounts illustrate how trend culture destabilises style confidence and identity.

Subtheme 2.2: Aesthetic Performance vs. Embodied Identity

7 out of 10 Participants described a psychological conflict between authentic self-expression and the pressure to visually perform socially desirable identities. Social media was seen to promote idealised aesthetics tied to imagined lifestyles, often leading to self-doubt or disconnection from personal style.

“I just get this piece for my wardrobe, you know, I’ll have boys asking me out, I’ll get that job... there’s definitely a kind of life promoted by this microtrend... If you’re wearing something mad like bloomers, you’re fun, you’re quirky.”

(Jamie)

Jamie’s reflection highlights how fashion becomes a tool for aspirational identity construction, where clothing is tied to desired outcomes and external validation.

“It’s almost like I’m not part of a club and I want to be, but to do that, I have to dress a certain way even though that doesn’t feel like who I am.”

(Catwoman)

Catwoman’s account reveals the internal dissonance between personal authenticity and social belonging. Together, these narratives reflect the psychological strain of navigating style in a culture that equates appearance with identity.

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Subtheme 2.3: Creative Discovery and Identity Affirmation Through Social Media

Although many participants expressed frustration with trend culture, 5 out of 10 participants described how social media platforms also inspired creativity and confidence. For these individuals, digital fashion spaces became tools for exploring style and affirming identity.

“It’s made me probably more creative because it’s allowed me to see opportunities of how to style things differently and how to do things differently.”

(Catwoman)

Catwoman’s account reflects how engaging with online fashion content can encourage experimentation and unlock new ways of expressing personal taste.

“Seeing queer people and lesbians online who dress in a way that I appreciate... has been very affirming for me in trying those styles.”

(Flowertot)

Flowertot’s comment reinforces how visibility and representation on social media can positively influence identity expression and style confidence.

Theme 3: The Erosion and Evolution of Subcultural Identity in Microtrend Culture

In response to RQ3, this theme explores how microtrend culture reshapes the meaning, visibility, and resistance potential of fashion subcultures. Participants reflected on the dilution of subcultural styles, the mainstreaming of rebellion, and how personal resistance can still act as a form of identity preservation in digital spaces.

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Subtheme 3.1: Subcultural Death, Dilution and Appropriation

All participants described how microtrend culture undermines the integrity of fashion subcultures, particularly those rooted in marginalised or politically charged communities. Trend cycles were seen to extract subcultural aesthetics without acknowledging their history, leading to symbolic dilution and a loss of meaning.

“I think microtrends override subcultures... They just go straight over... That’s kind of like how I would view the relationship.”

(George)

George highlights how fast-moving trends bypass the depth and context of subcultures, treating them as visual resources rather than cultural expressions.

“You can sort of dabble in it a little bit and then move on... if you do it cheaply, then people are going to connotate goth with cheapness... by borrowing, it just sort of kills the image of subcultures.”

(Catwoman)

Catwoman reflects on how superficial trend participation can devalue subcultures, reducing them to fleeting aesthetics. Together, these accounts suggest that commodification through microtrends accelerates the erosion of subcultural identity and meaning.

Subtheme 3.2: The Weakening of Resistance, Rebellion and Individuality in Fashion

All participants reflected on the growing difficulty of using fashion as a mode of resistance or nonconformity. In the age of microtrends, styles that once symbolised rebellion

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are quickly commodified, leaving little room for genuine individuality or sustained opposition to the mainstream.

“Nobody takes the time to curate their style anymore; it’s just what they see. People are all carbon copies of each other, and the weird thing is, they don’t even seem to mind. Now, if you wear something different, you’re the niche one, the anomaly.”

(Serenity)

Serenity’s account highlights the emotional impact of aesthetic homogenisation and the fading value of intentional self-styling. In this context, difference becomes rare, and individuality is framed as deviation rather than expression.

“I do think it is kind of harder to resist mainstream because you can be mainstream without even knowing it... So you’ve tried to resist and then you can’t.”

(Jamie)

Jamie’s reflection reinforces the idea that fashion resistance is often neutralised by the very systems it aims to subvert. Together, these narratives suggest that in a digital culture of constant visual repetition, rebellion itself risks becoming indistinguishable from trend participation.

Subtheme 3.3: Resisting Trends as Self-Definition and Personal Agency

5 out of 10 participants framed the rejection of microtrends as an intentional act of self-definition. In contrast to trend conformity, dressing independently was described as a way to assert personal agency, creativity, and authenticity. For these individuals, resisting trends was not simply refusal, but a deliberate expression of autonomy.

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"I mean, me personally, I don't like to be seen as someone who's wearing things that are trendy... I think that's part of the rebellious creative where you just want to be seen for who you are and not what everyone else is enforcing upon you."

(George)

George's reflection links resistance to creative rebellion, emphasising a desire to be recognised as authentic rather than trend-driven.

"I think when you cultivate your own style and you have, I guess, confidence to live where you're happy to sit within dressing, you can pick and choose what trends you decide to play a part in and then ditch the rest."

(Flowertot)

Flowertot illustrates a more fluid form of resistance, grounded in confidence and intentionality. Together, these accounts suggest that personal style can be both expressive and discerning, empowering individuals to engage with trends on their own terms.

(See Appendix B for additional thematic quotes.)

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DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the findings in relation to the study's three research questions, relevant psychological theory, and existing literature. The research explored how social media and microtrend culture shape fashion consumers' identity, individuality, and subcultural engagement. Reflexive thematic analysis showed that many participants experienced identity confusion and emotional fatigue, with fashion choices often shaped more by algorithms than personal preference. A smaller group found empowerment in the inspiration and exposure social platforms offered. Subcultural affiliation was linked to greater identity clarity and symbolic resistance, especially among participants with stronger style confidence. However, many perceived that microtrend culture accelerates the dilution and commodification of subcultural aesthetics, weakening fashion's role as a site of rebellion. The following sections explore how digital fashion spaces complicate authenticity, undermine autonomy, and reshape subcultural meaning.

Social Media, Trend Saturation, and the Erosion of Style Autonomy

Many participants described feeling emotionally overwhelmed or creatively fatigued by the constant pressure to stay on trend. Fast-moving fashion cycles made it difficult to form meaningful connections with clothing, as styles were adopted and discarded too quickly. This reflects aesthetic fatigue, rooted in earlier theories of fashion cycles and identity tension (Simmel, 1957; Kawamura, 2005), where oversaturation of trend content leads to psychological disengagement. TikTok and Instagram were identified as key drivers, creating urgency and fear of appearing outdated. Younger participants, in particular, described dressing to "fit in" despite not identifying with the styles, suggesting that algorithm-driven cycles can reduce personal style autonomy especially among younger users.

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This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which identifies autonomy as a basic psychological need. Participants who felt pressure to conform described a loss of control in their style choices, driven more by what was popular than by personal meaning. Some felt overwhelmed by the volume of styles and struggled to identify what they genuinely liked. Others adapted their clothing simply to remain relevant, echoing Yang et al.'s (2018) argument that constant comparison in digital environments undermines self-concept clarity.

Less secure participants often described their style using aesthetic or trend-based labels, indicating reliance on microtrends for inclusion. In contrast, those with stronger identity clarity used broader, more stable terms, supporting Belk's (2013) concept of the extended self, where clothing and digital aesthetics are closely intertwined with identity. For many, fashion choices reflected social visibility and external validation rather than self-expression.

Age also played a role in fashion autonomy. Older participants expressed more confidence and felt less influenced by online trends, while younger participants were still developing their style. This supports Lodi-Smith et al.'s (2017) finding that self-concept clarity typically increases with age, helping individuals maintain a stable sense of style and resist external pressures.

While most participants reported emotional fatigue and diminished autonomy, a smaller number described more positive experiences. These individuals used social media as a source of creative inspiration, engaging with niche communities and global aesthetics to develop personal style. For them, social media enhanced autonomy, not reduced it,

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supporting Belk's (2013) notion of digital identity as selectively curated. In these cases, even engagement with dominant aesthetics felt autonomous, so long as it was internally motivated.

In summary, social media and accelerated trend cycles significantly shaped participants' emotional engagement with fashion and sense of autonomy. While many felt confused, fatigued, or pressured to conform, others used digital platforms for creative exploration. These contrasting experiences reveal a deeper psychological tension between cultural relevance and authentic self-expression a theme expanded in the next section.

Negotiating Fashion Identity: Navigating Between Self-Expression and Aesthetic Conformity Online

Participants described fashion identity as fluid and often conflicted, shaped by both internal expression and external aesthetic pressures. While many aimed for authenticity, platforms like TikTok and Instagram promoted dominant aesthetics such as "clean girl" that created expectations about how one "should" dress. This aesthetics were continually recycled through algorithmic exposure and often extended beyond fashion to encompass lifestyle ideals (e.g., wellness, habits), blurring lines between appearance and aspirational identity. This constrained self-expression by embedding fashion within performance-based norms (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Rather than passively adopting trends, participants frequently adjusted or censored their appearance to meet these unspoken standards. This reflects Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, where individuals evaluate their choices against perceived norms, especially when lacking a clear self-concept.

This negotiation was particularly difficult for those still developing their fashion identity. Persistent exposure to curated aesthetics destabilised their sense of style, fostering insecurity and making it hard to distinguish personal taste from trend influence. Several

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described feeling caught between expressing their “true self” and presenting a version deemed socially or algorithmically acceptable. Brewer’s (1991) Optimal Distinctiveness Theory helps explain this tension: while participants wanted to be unique, they also feared the social cost of standing out. This led some to conform to visual norms, while others felt increasingly disconnected from their style.

Gender also shaped these negotiations. Male participants often expressed uncertainty and discomfort with style experimentation, using trends for direction or safety. Their reluctance to stand out could be linked to traditional masculine norms that restrict expressive dress, an issue underexplored in fashion identity literature. While female participants also felt pressure, some framed trend engagement as part of their creative or identity development, not simply as conformity. This suggests that fashion identity is shaped not only psychologically, but socially through gendered expectations. As Entwistle (2000) argues, men’s fashion is shaped by constraints that discourage deviation from normative masculinity. This limited men’s ability to explore, increasing reliance on digital templates and external approval.

In addition to aesthetic pressure, participants described internal conflict between their desired self-presentation and what was considered appealing online. Some noted feeling inauthentic when their style choices were driven by validation rather than personal alignment. This reflects Higgins’ (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory, which hypothesises that a mismatch between the actual and ideal self can lead to psychological discomfort. In fashion, this means constructing an image for approval can dilute identity and increase psychological strain.

However, not all participants viewed this negotiation negatively. A few described remixing trends to suit their aesthetic, putting their own spin on dominant styles. These participants approached trends selectively and critically, using them as tools rather than

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templates. Their engagement reflects a more autonomous relationship with fashion, consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), where behaviour is guided by internal values and self-alignment.

In summary, this theme shows how fashion identity is actively negotiated through both internal conflict and external influence. While social media offers creative inspiration, it also promotes conformity via algorithmic repetition. Participants with lower self-concept clarity were more affected by these pressures, while those with stronger self-awareness used trends as a means of self-expression. Digital fashion spaces, therefore, both enable and complicate authenticity depending on how consciously users engage with them.

Microtrend Culture: Dilution, Resistance, and the Evolving Role of Subcultural Fashion Identity

This final theme explores how microtrend culture affects the role of subcultures in shaping fashion identity and enabling symbolic resistance. Participants who identified with subcultures or alternative fashion described a strong sense of identity stability, often viewing their style as an extension of their values and beliefs. These individuals spoke with clarity and confidence, maintaining aesthetic consistency despite broader trend cycles. Their accounts reflect Hebdige's (1979) view of subcultures as sites of resistance, where dress symbolises rebellion against mainstream norms. In contrast, participants without subcultural ties reported frequent style changes and uncertainty about their fashion identity.

All ten participants reflected on subcultural dilution and fashion's weakened role in resistance, making this the most consistently discussed theme. The frequency and intensity of these reflections suggest that these concerns are not isolated but widespread in contemporary digital fashion identity.

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Participants described how platforms like TikTok and Instagram rapidly extract and recirculate subcultural visuals, stripping them of meaning. This dilution, especially of symbols like carabiners or ties, was a key concern for those with strong subcultural ties. They viewed their aesthetics as being commodified into fleeting microtrends, erasing their original intent as a resistant expression. While some scholars argue that TikTok fosters new forms of subcultural identity (Santaolalla-Rueda & Fernández-Muñoz, 2024), participants emphasised the cost: a loss of symbolic depth and authenticity. This frustration reflects both Hebdige's (1979) concept of subcultural incorporation and Brewer's (1991) theory of optimal distinctiveness, as mainstreaming reduced both uniqueness and community meaning.

Although most saw microtrend culture as undermining subcultural style, some experienced moments of affirmation. Seeing their communities gain visibility in fashion spaces fostered feelings of pride and representation. However, this was often paired with ambivalence, as aesthetics that brought visibility were also easily co-opted by mainstream audiences.

Beyond appropriation, participants reflected on how trend culture weakens fashion's ability to signal rebellion or individuality. Unlike traditional subcultures grounded in shared values and sustained identity, microtrends are driven by novelty and algorithmic appeal. The rapid churn of aesthetics, combined with fast fashion and marketing, was seen to limit genuine self-definition. Many felt that fashion no longer offered a viable space for resistance, as formerly alternative styles were quickly absorbed, commodified, or rebranded. This supports critiques that trend culture neutralises symbolic resistance by flattening oppositional styles for mass consumption restricting self-definition rather than enabling it.

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Nevertheless, some participants resisted conformity as an act of self-definition. They described making deliberate style choices and rejecting trends misaligned with their identity. This reflects Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that high intrinsic motivation supports autonomy even in trend-heavy environments.

In summary, microtrend culture has reshaped subcultural fashion identity by accelerating appropriation and reducing symbolic meaning. While many participants felt this eroded subcultural expression, others found ways to adapt or resist. Symbolic resistance remains possible but increasingly difficult to sustain in algorithmic fashion spaces. Participants described subcultures as fading or becoming hollowed out, with future generations potentially unable to form style communities with the same depth or cohesion. Rapid trend turnover and online saturation were seen to fragment attention, making it harder to build lasting, value-driven identities around fashion.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Work

This study contributes to a growing body of research exploring how identity is constructed, negotiated, and sometimes destabilised in digital fashion spaces. Using reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews provided rich insight into how microtrend culture intersects with personal style, identity, and resistance.

One key strength was the diversity in participants' age, fashion engagement, and subcultural affiliation. This allowed for meaningful comparisons across varying levels of identity clarity and digital involvement, with older participants and subcultural members often reporting more stable fashion identities. While gendered differences emerged such as male participants expressing more discomfort with style experimentation it is important to note that only three men were interviewed. This limits the generalisability of gender-related

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insights. Additionally, most participants were White British, which may have restricted the cultural and intersectional range of perspectives. Given the influence of race, ethnicity, and culture on fashion identity, future studies should aim to include a more ethnically and culturally diverse participant pool to better reflect broader consumer experiences.

Another strength was the use of a reflexive, qualitative approach. This enabled participants to express nuanced, sometimes contradictory thoughts, which may have been overlooked in a quantitative study. Reflexivity also allowed the researcher to remain responsive to emerging themes such as the dual experience of social media as both empowering and restricting and helped reduce the risk of researcher bias.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size (N=10) limits generalisability, and all participants were active social media users, which may have biased the data toward those already engaged with digital fashion culture. Individuals less exposed to or critical of social media were not represented.

The cross-sectional nature of the study is another limitation. Interviews captured perspectives at one point in time, yet fashion identity is fluid. As Davis (1992) notes, fashion continuously reflects shifts in values and context. A longitudinal approach could offer deeper insight into how relationships with fashion and trends evolve. Menard (2002) argues that longitudinal studies are essential for identifying developmental patterns that cross-sectional research may miss.

Additionally, while subcultural participants provided valuable insight, only a small number of distinct subcultures were represented. Future research could focus on specific communities (e.g., queer or diaspora subcultures) to explore how identity is anchored in different fashion spaces.

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Self-reporting also posed limitations. Social desirability may have influenced participants' responses, particularly regarding conformity or individuality. While rapport was built to encourage honesty, feelings such as fashion-related shame or anxiety may have been underreported.

For future research, several directions are recommended. First, larger and more diverse samples would allow for broader cultural and socioeconomic comparisons. Second, longitudinal studies could track how fashion identity develops in response to evolving trends. Third, mixed-methods designs could combine interviews with measures of identity clarity, trend engagement, or well-being to triangulate findings.

Importantly, future work should also examine psychological strategies consumers use to maintain individuality in a fast-paced trend culture. As this study found, selective engagement with trends, curating digital feeds, or rooting style in offline communities helped some participants resist conformity. Understanding these strategies could inform interventions across fashion, education, and digital design.

Brands could promote identity resilience by celebrating value-driven aesthetics over algorithmic trends. Schools could implement critical media literacy programmes to help young people question dominant aesthetics and develop autonomous style choices. Digital platforms could explore design shifts such as curated feeds or reduced emphasis on virality that promote individuality. These efforts may be especially relevant for Generation Alpha, who are growing up immersed in algorithmic platforms and may face intensified pressures around identity performance. Early engagement with identity resilience and digital awareness will be key to supporting their psychological well-being and authentic self-expression.

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Researcher reflection

As someone engaged with the intersection of fashion and digital culture, I approached this study with a strong interest in how trend cycles and social media shape identity. While the topic felt familiar, conducting this research enabled me to explore it through a more structured and analytical lens. The process of reflexive thematic analysis deepened my understanding of how individual experiences reflect broader cultural dynamics, particularly in relation to identity negotiation and symbolic resistance. I became more attuned to the nuanced ways participants navigated conformity and authenticity, which enhanced my ability to interpret fashion not just as expression, but as a psychological and social negotiation. This project reinforced the value of qualitative research in uncovering layered experiences and highlighted the importance of reflexivity in maintaining analytical clarity.

Conclusion

This study explored how social media and microtrend culture influence fashion consumers' identity, individuality, and subcultural engagement. Through reflexive thematic analysis of ten qualitative interviews, the findings revealed a complex and often contradictory landscape. While many participants described emotional fatigue, identity instability, and pressure to conform to algorithmically promoted aesthetics, others found moments of empowerment and creativity through digital fashion spaces.

Microtrend culture appeared to weaken perceived autonomy in style choices, particularly among participants with lower fashion confidence or identity clarity. Social media was often experienced as a homogenising force, promoting surface-level engagement and making it harder to sustain an authentic fashion identity. However, subcultural affiliation,

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personal maturity, and offline community support seemed to buffer these pressures, helping participants maintain a stronger sense of self.

This study contributes to fashion psychology by applying frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory, Extended Self Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory to the digital fashion context. In doing so, it highlights the evolving psychological landscape of self-presentation in an era shaped by trend saturation and algorithmic influence.

Ultimately, while trend culture and social media present challenges to authenticity, the findings suggest that consumers are not passive. With self-awareness, community support, and critical engagement, individuals can still navigate these spaces in ways that reflect their values and identities. As digital fashion continues to evolve, ongoing research will be vital in supporting autonomy, meaning, and resilience in style choices. However, this potential for autonomy exists within a broader cultural landscape that is becoming increasingly unstable. While individuals can still resist or redefine fashion norms, the accelerating pace of trend cycles may be undermining the very foundations needed to build lasting, value-driven identities.

This fragmentation may reflect a broader cultural shift towards what Bauman (2000) terms “liquid modernity,” where identities are less rooted and more transient. In this context, fashion subcultures no longer operate as stable identity anchors but as fleeting aesthetic moods rapidly recycled through algorithmic feeds. As symbolic resistance becomes aestheticised and commodified, its capacity to challenge dominant values weakens, reducing fashion’s historical role as a site of dissent. This raises important questions about whether

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future generations will have the cultural or cognitive space to form fashion communities grounded in shared meaning, rather than momentary trends.

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: Interview Schedule**

This interview schedule was designed to explore participants' experiences with fashion identity, microtrends, subcultures, and the influence of social media. Questions were organised into four thematic sections.

Section 1: Personal Style, Identity & Self-Concept

- How old are you?
- What is your preferred gender?
- How would you describe your personal style?
- Do you feel your style reflects your personality or values? In what ways?
- Can you describe a moment when you felt most confident in your fashion identity?
- Have you ever felt pressure to change your style to fit in either online or in real life?
- Has social media influenced how you see your fashion identity? If so, how?
- Have you ever changed your style because of a viral trend? Can you describe that experience?

Section 2: Microtrends & Social Media Influence

- How would you define a microtrend? Can you think of any recent examples?
- Why do you think microtrends exist, and what drives them?
- Do you think social media algorithms influence your interest in certain aesthetics or fashion styles?
- Do you feel social media has increased pressure to constantly change your fashion style?
- When you see a microtrend gaining traction online, what is your typical reaction?

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- Do you follow any specific creators or influencers whose style affects your own? Why them?
- Have you ever felt overwhelmed or fatigued by the speed of changing trends online?
- Do you think it's possible to opt out of microtrends while still engaging with fashion online?
- Do you think microtrends are killing individuality or making it harder for people to use fashion to resist the norm? Why or why not?

Section 3: Subcultures & Fashion Communities

- Do you believe fashion subcultures still exist today? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt part of a distinct fashion subculture or aesthetic movement? How did it shape your identity?
- How would you define a fashion subculture in today's digital age?
- What do you think is the relationship between microtrends and subcultures?
- Do you think microtrends are contributing to the decline of long-term fashion subcultures?
- Do you think microtrends borrow from subcultures without preserving their meaning or values?
- Have you noticed any shifts in how fashion communities form online versus offline?
- Do you think it's harder now to find or sustain a sense of belonging in fashion communities?
- Do you think fashion is still a way for people to rebel or resist mainstream culture? Why or why not?
- Do you think trend cycles today make it harder for people to resist mainstream styles?
- Is there a difference between dressing 'alternative' and actually being alternative?

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Section 4: Emotional & Psychological Impact

- Do you feel any emotional impact (positive or negative) from engaging with fashion trends online?
- Have you ever felt conflicted between following a trend and staying true to your style?
- How do you feel when a fashion style you identify with becomes a fleeting trend?
- Do you think your fashion choices are influenced more by social media or by personal values?
- Do you think the fast pace of online trends affects how people value or connect with fashion long-term?

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Appendix B: Thematic Table of Quotes

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Verbatim Quote
The Psychological Impact of Social Media and Trend Saturation	1.1 Algorithmic Exposure and Trend-Led Consumption	Hank: The stuff I interact with more, the microtrends I engage with keep appearing, so it influences me to want to buy them.
		Jamie: I wouldn't have bought it had TikTok not shown it to me 150 times.
		George: If it's on my internet feeds and I pay a slight bit of interest, then it's back in my internet feed, and then I go oh, now I'm more tempted... every time I see it, I'm more and more tempted.
	1.2 Trend Cycle Burnout	Catwoman: It gets so overwhelming because they do just come and go so quickly. And then you end up at home with a wardrobe full of clothes that you don't like because they're trends from like four months ago... and you feel like a gimmick to wear them.
		Larry: There's so many microtrends... every year, it gets more and more, more and more. I just think everything fashion, music, any form of art you know, the sea level's rising in it all. It's getting very hard to keep up.
		Shera: It gets overwhelming... if you fall off even for a month, it's like you've missed 20 aesthetics.
1.3 Disillusionment and Emotional Disconnection from Fashion	Flowertot: Really upset actually. It makes me feel like I'm watching the decline of my own	

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		<p>personal style play out before my eyes...</p>
		<p>Flowertot: I think we've lost this connection to our own personal style because everything moves so quickly. So we don't cherish things and we don't buy with intention.</p>
		<p>Catwoman: I see the same sort of outfit regurgitated 16 times... I feel a little bit exhausted and bored by it all and uninspired actually.</p>
<p>Psychological Tension Between Personal Style, Trend Conformity, and Authenticity</p>	<p>2.1 Identity Instability and Style Uncertainty</p>	<p>Catwoman: And you'll have negative connotations to a trend or outfit that you feel very much is authentically you... it makes you feel like confused and sad and scared and, you know, wanting to change yourself constantly.</p>
		<p>Hank: I'll see something cool that I like and want to copy it, or I'll see something I think I like but lots of people don't, and that might make me not want to wear it.</p>
		<p>Flowertot: You're kind of constantly re-evaluating if your current look is good enough.</p>
	<p>2.2 Aesthetic Performance vs. Embodied Identity</p>	<p>Jamie: I just get this piece for my wardrobe, you know, I'll have boys asking me out, I'll get that job... there's definitely a kind of life promoted by this microtrend...</p>
		<p>Catwoman: It's almost like I'm not part of a club and I want to be, but to do that, I have to dress a certain way even though that doesn't feel like who I am.</p>

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		<p>Bryce: People are more concerned with how their style <i>*looks*</i> rather than what it <i>*means*</i> to them.</p>
	<p>2.3 Digital Exploration and Identity Affirmation</p>	<p>Catwoman: It's made me probably more creative because it's allowed me to see opportunities of how to style things differently and how to do things differently.</p> <p>Flowertot: Seeing queer people and lesbians online who dress in a way that I appreciate... has been very affirming for me in trying those styles.</p> <p>Larry: Social media gave me the space to experiment without judgement.</p>
<p>The Erosion and Evolution of Subcultural Identity in Microtrend Culture</p>	<p>Subtheme 3.1: Subcultural Death, Dilution and Appropriation</p>	<p>George: I think microtrends override subcultures... They just go straight over... That's kind of like how I would view the relationship.</p> <p>Catwoman: You can sort of dabble in it a little bit and then move on... if you do it cheaply, then people are going to connotate goth with cheapness... by borrowing, it just sort of kills the image of subcultures.</p> <p>Helon: Subcultures don't really have time to build anymore. They get eaten up.</p>
	<p>3.2 Weakening of Resistance, Rebellion, and Individuality</p>	<p>Serenity: Nobody takes the time to curate their style anymore; it's just what they see. People are all carbon copies of each other, and the weird thing is, they don't even seem to mind. Now, if you wear something different, you're the niche one the anomaly.</p>

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		<p>Jamie: I do think it is kind of harder to resist mainstream because you can be mainstream without even knowing it... So you've tried to resist and then you can't.</p>
		<p>Bryce: Even alternative looks are curated now. It's rebellion that's been branded.</p>
	<p>3.3 Resistance as Identity and Personal Agency</p>	<p>George: I don't like to be seen as someone who's wearing things that are trendy... I think that's part of the rebellious creative where you just want to be seen for who you are.</p>
		<p>Flowertot: I think when you cultivate your own style... you can pick and choose what trends you decide to play a part in and then ditch the rest.</p>
		<p>Shera: If you want to figure out how you really want to dress, you have to step back and figure it out in your own time away from constant exposure to things like TikTok.</p>

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Appendix C: Interview Transcript Extract

Interview Transcript (first 2 pages)

Pseudonym: Jamie Lee

Date: 09/04/2025

Age: 23

Gender: Female

Ethnicity: White British

Interview Context: This semi-structured interview was conducted as part of a qualitative research project exploring the influence of social media and microtrend culture on fashion identity and self-expression. The participant, pseudonym *Jamie Lee*, is a 23-year-old white British female who works full-time in London. The interview was conducted online via video call and lasted approximately 45 minutes. It aimed to explore Jamie Lee's personal experiences with fashion trends, social media influence, identity development, and emotional responses to fast-paced trend cycles. All ethical guidelines were followed, including informed consent and anonymity through pseudonymisation

Researcher:

How would you describe your personal style?

Jamie Lee:

I feel like my personal style is quite classic. I don't really wear anything that mad. I don't follow a lot of trends. I tend to get more staple pieces in my wardrobe. And then if I like something, even if it's not in style, I'll probably wear it again. It's quite classic, with some

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influence from trends, but only the ones that I really like. And I think quite a lot before I buy things.

Researcher:

Do you feel your style reflects your personality or values?

Jamie Lee:

I don't think so. I don't think my clothing really represents who I am as a person. It's quite basic clothing you know, I just wear a jumper and jeans. I know there are people who express their personality through clothing, like wearing a lot of jewellery and stuff. I just wear it if I can be bothered, especially jewellery if I remember to put it on, great. I kind of always go for the same pieces. So I think it's quite basic. Just black tops, jeans, trousers so probably not, no.

Researcher:

Can you describe a moment when you felt most confident in your fashion identity? Do you feel confident?

Jamie Lee:

I've always felt a bit like I never have the right clothes, you know what I mean? I try to buy trendy things, and then I look at my wardrobe and I'm like, well, none of this is right.

Someone else could wear it and pull it off way better. So, no, I don't feel confident in my fashion identity, but there are some outfits that I know look nice on me. Like, I have this really nice cardigan, and I have two nice pairs of jeans that I know look good.

Also, because I work full time, I'm usually in shirts and work trousers I have to wear smart clothes and sometimes I feel like my personality shows more in those than in my weekend

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clothes. I try to wear nice, presentable things, and I push the boundaries a bit like I wore a crop top the other day, and I got told off for it!

Researcher:

Have you ever felt pressured to change your style to fit in, either online or in real life?

Jamie Lee:

Yeah, 100%. I mean, I was really big into the 2014 Dan and Phil era. I wanted the side fringe I got the side fringe I did not suit the side fringe! That Dan and Phil look was so weirdly hard to achieve, you had to have the right hair texture, kind of frizzy and messy but not too much. I also wanted to be really emo, but I didn't have any emo clothes. That was what I was looking at online, and that's what my friends were wearing. And were they actually my friends? They weren't very nice to me, so maybe I was trying to impress them by wearing those clothes.

I probably followed every trend when I was younger Aztec print, the 2015 Pinterest phase, cameras, the boho flower crowns. The minute Instagram really took off, people were posting those really aesthetic coffee photos and outfits. I was definitely influenced when I was younger. I'd say not so much now, though, partly because trends move so fast that once I like something, it's already gone. And also because of money clothes are expensive, and I don't want to spend on something I'll only wear once. I use Vinted more than normal shops now.

Researcher:

Has social media influenced how you see your fashion identity? If so, how?

Jamie Lee:

Yeah, I feel like I always see people on TikTok, and I'm like, that looks really nice. But if I wore that, it wouldn't look as good. And it's not actually anything to do with how they look

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or their body, because I know I used to think, oh, that would look so much nicer if I was thinner. But actually, I've seen more plus-size people who look great in clothes. It's just that when I try, it never really works out. That's why I tend to stick to the basics.

I mean, there's obviously that trend on TikTok where it's like, everyone knows this is the first day I'm wearing pink shoes, and I'm normally a white shoe person, so now I'm a pink shoe fraud! I get that feeling that sense of always being perceived. And I'd say there's definitely been an increase in that with social media. That feeling that you're always being watched because someone could just be filming you, and you wouldn't even know then you come across yourself on YouTube or TikTok, and people are like, oh, what an ugly outfit, you know?

I think especially since moving to London, I care more about how I dress because of that whole "London girl" social media image she's cool, she's trendy, she wears mad things like bloomers. And tourists come here and take pictures, and that just reinforces it. So yeah, I think it has a big impact.

Researcher:

Have you ever changed your style because of a viral trend? Can you describe that experience?

Jamie Lee:

Yeah, 2014, 2015 that whole boho, Coachella chic era. I was definitely trying to bring in the fringe jackets. Oh my God, the moustaches they were everywhere. The tops that said "geek," I had those too. Even the American leisurewear jumpers with university names that was a trend, and I bought one of those.

Researcher:

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Did you ever internalise what the whole aesthetic was about, or was it just purely looks-based?

Jamie Lee:

For me, it was probably looks-based, because I was a lot less confident in myself back then. I was desperate to fit in. Now, I don't care as much. There are so many different identities and styles out there that realistically, everyone's worried about their own outfit, not yours. But yeah, back then, it was about fitting in. For my friends, during their emo phase, it was more about rebelling against their parents but for me, it was just wanting to do what they were doing.

Researcher:

How would you define a microtrend?

Jamie Lee:

Well, bloomers! I was just thinking about this bloomers were huge, everyone was buying them. Why were we buying them? They looked awful! I definitely bought into microtrends, especially in 2020 during lockdown. I had everything cow print, all of it. I definitely developed a bit of a shopping addiction because we were all depressed and stuck inside, so I was online shopping, going on Shein because it was cheap. I'd buy clothes, wear them a couple of times, and that was it.

Now, I think more carefully like, will I wear this in five years? If not, probably not worth it. Microtrends come around quickly and disappear just as fast. Even things like the Scandi style that came and went quickly. Some trends stick, like gingham or cardigans, because they're versatile, but others are more controversial. Cow print, for example not everyone will wear it, but it's trendy, so people do.

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Researcher:

Why do you think microtrends exist and what drives them?

Jamie Lee:

I was going to say, like, I don't think microtrends would exist without social media, but I don't really remember existing without social media in a way that, you know, by the time that I could kind of dress myself, social media was already existing. Because before that, my mum would just buy my clothes. And I mean, I probably would have given into more microtrends when I was younger, had my mum been a bit less strict, because she would not let me get clothes that she did not like.

So I think microtrends probably come around with... I mean, I guess I feel like if you look in the past, probably everyone can say there was a microtrend here, there and everywhere, you know? Men don't wear what they wore in the 70s, which is such a shame. They had such nice outfits. But, you know, like in the 80s, we don't have big afros and neon anymore.

But those kind of seem to have lasted way longer than trends do now. And I would probably say that's in the rise of social media. We don't have things like TikTok and like "get ready with me to spend a day in London." You're wearing like a stupid outfit and everyone goes, "Oh, OK, I want that outfit. If that's the life I get."

I think in a weird way, people correlate microtrends with a certain life. It's like, "If I do this, then everything will be fine." And I've definitely thought that before. I'm like, right, if I just get this piece for my wardrobe, you know, I'll have boys asking me out, I'll get that job.

Like, how stupid is that? It's a piece of clothing. It's not going to fix anything, but there's definitely a kind of life promoted by this microtrend. You know, if you're wearing something mad like bloomers, you're fun, you're quirky.

You want people to see you like that. If you're doing the Scandi style, or put together like clean girl clean girl aesthetic went out the window. Clean girl is not only a microtrend, it's

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also quite damaging. It's conservative. That's against... it's literally conservatism. Stop slicking back your hair, everyone you're killing it.

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Appendix D: Reflective Statement

It took me a lot longer than I expected to decide on a dissertation topic, and I'll admit, that indecisiveness set me back by a few weeks. I was stuck in my head, going back and forth on ideas, unsure of what felt "right" or meaningful enough to carry through such a big piece of work. In all honesty, I can't pinpoint the exact moment the idea for my dissertation fully came together. There wasn't a sudden lightbulb moment more a slow unfolding of thoughts that had been building for a long time. I was constantly thinking about the world around me, how people interact with trends and fashion online, and how individual expression feels increasingly diluted in the digital age. Eventually, I found myself gravitating towards this deeper question: are we losing our individuality and sense of resistance because of the overwhelming saturation of information and aesthetics online?

This concern might sound dramatic or even a little far-fetched, but I found myself drawn to the idea of a subtle "hive mind" a culture where we are so constantly exposed to the same content, ideals, and aesthetics that we become less able to think or dress for ourselves. My fascination with these kinds of societal influences, especially as they relate to fashion and identity, was what really shaped the direction of my research. I've always seen fashion as more than just clothing; it's a form of communication, resistance, and identity-building. The way microtrends have taken over social media with their speed, uniformity, and disposability made me wonder what happens to subcultures and self-expression in such a context. If everyone is drawn to the same trending look, can anything truly alternative still exist? And what are the psychological effects of this conformity?

As part of Generation Z, I recognise that we're more educated and aware of these dynamics than previous generations but even then, awareness doesn't always equal immunity. I started thinking about Generation Alpha, children already immersed in these cycles from such a

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young age. When you see 13-year-olds buying anti-ageing cream or mimicking TikTok aesthetics with incredible precision, you start to wonder what individuality will even mean in ten years. These questions fuelled my motivation and gave the dissertation a deeper personal relevance. I wasn't just researching something academic I was exploring something I genuinely care about and worry about.

Once I settled on my topic, gathering literature turned out to be much more overwhelming than I anticipated. I ended up collecting far too much, and I've always struggled with organising and prioritising sources something I've faced throughout my degree. That said, I can confidently say I've improved in this area. While I still found it difficult to streamline what to include in the final literature review, I was much better at recognising which sources were most relevant to my research questions compared to when I started university. The challenge with this particular topic was that it spanned multiple disciplines: psychology, fashion, digital culture, and even philosophy. I had to navigate quite a few tangents before finding the most useful academic foundations. The word count limitations made things harder, and I found myself trying to squeeze too much into one section leading to a cycle of over-writing and then having to cut entire sections, which was frustrating and time-consuming.

When it came to gathering data, I definitely underestimated how long it would take to organise and conduct interviews. One of the biggest challenges was finding suitable participants especially men who were not only into fashion but also aware of online trends. I wanted a balance of male and female perspectives (ideally five of each), but due to scheduling issues and being on a tight deadline, this didn't happen. I also hadn't fully factored in the difficulty of balancing my part-time job with the dissertation timeline. Trying to align my own availability with my participants' schedules proved harder than expected,

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and I learned that data collection requires more flexibility and contingency planning than I initially allowed for.

The hardest part of the entire dissertation, by far, was the data analysis. I used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, and while I understood the theory, applying it in practice, especially to such a large amount of qualitative data, was incredibly daunting. The initial codes I created only reflected the first few transcripts, thinking I had sorted the codes and themes gave me a false sense of progress. I assumed I was further along than I actually was, which slowed me down. Once I got to the richer, later transcripts, I realised the early themes didn't reflect the full dataset at all, and I had to backtrack significantly. This ended up costing me several days of work and added a lot of unnecessary stress.

I also found it emotionally difficult to let go of quotes I'd become attached to. Because so many of them felt powerful or insightful in some way, I kept building this huge quote table far too large for the word count I had. Cutting it down was tedious and frustrating, and I now realise that my tendency to hold onto "just in case" material can be inefficient. I've always struggled to streamline information, and this became really clear in both the literature review and the data analysis stages. One key lesson I've taken from this is the importance of prioritising clarity over quantity. Not everything needs to be included to make a strong point and I need to trust myself more when making those editorial decisions.

Another thing I reflected on was the interview guide itself. While most of my questions were useful, there were a few that, in hindsight, didn't yield meaningful data or weren't as relevant once I began interpreting the themes. There were also a couple of things I *should* have asked, but didn't think of until I was already deep into the thematic analysis. That was a frustrating realisation, but also a valuable learning moment one that has made me more conscious of the

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planning and foresight needed for good qualitative research. I now understand how much the quality of your data is shaped by the structure and clarity of your interview questions.

Upon reflection, I also realised that the scope of my research question in the lab report may have been too broad. While I was passionate about exploring the many dimensions of how microtrend culture influences identity, individuality, and subcultures, I now recognise that trying to cover so many aspects in one study made the project more difficult to manage and slightly diluted the depth of my findings. A more focused and specific research question could have allowed me to explore one area such as identity negotiation or subcultural resistance in greater depth and with more nuance. This is something I will definitely take on board for any future research projects, as I've learned the importance of narrowing the focus in order to produce richer, more detailed insights.

In terms of my personal working style, I know time management is not my strong point, and I think ADHD definitely plays a role here. I tend to underestimate how long things will take, which leaves me vulnerable to last-minute stress. Even though I tried to plan ahead and give myself extra time, I still found myself under pressure at several key points. I also struggle with concentration and time blindness, which meant that some days I could work for hours, and others I couldn't get started at all. I've learned over time that breaking tasks into small, manageable chunks really helps, and this is something I'll definitely keep applying in future projects. Still, I found myself burning out towards the end. The repetitive nature of dissertation writing made it hard to stay motivated, and I hit a wall where everything felt like a chore. I pushed through, but it wasn't easy, and I think more structured breaks or even accountability check-ins could have helped me stay more consistent.

Despite all the setbacks, I've come away from this dissertation feeling proud of what I achieved. There were a lot of ups and downs throughout the process, but I feel like I've

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learned a huge amount not just about microtrends and identity, but also about myself as a researcher. I've developed better skills in data handling, organisation, and academic writing. I've also learned what doesn't work for me and how I can adapt to better manage big projects in the future. Most importantly, I've produced a piece of work that I believe contributes to an important and under-explored area in fashion psychology. That in itself feels like an achievement.

This dissertation wasn't just a test of knowledge it was a test of discipline, resilience, and self-awareness. And although it was tough at times, I'm glad I went through the process. I've come out of it more confident in my ability to produce meaningful research, and more aware of how I can continue to grow and improve in the future.

Appendix F: Approved Ethics Application**RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FORM – STUDENT RESEARCH**

Psychology Research Ethics Panel (PREP)

Guidance:

- **Please ensure that you have read the UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, UAL Code of Practice on Educational Ethics, and the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics before completing this form.**
- Please complete this form electronically. While completing it, delete all the text in green font, which is meant to guide you.
- **Section A** is to be completed by the student and Supervisor / Unit Leader.
- **Section B** is for PREP and UAL Sub-Committee use only.
- Once Section A has been completed, the form should be submitted to the relevant staff member (e.g., Unit Leader, Course Leader) by the student. Instructions on who to submit the form to will be given in each unit.
- **Incomplete applications which are missing question responses, signatures, documents for the participants (Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, Debriefing Sheet), or relevant appendices (e.g., study advert, questionnaires, instructions, interview questions, tasks, stimuli such as images) will be returned to the student for completion. This will delay the review and approval process.**

Section A**to be completed by the student**

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Name:	Annabelle Hall
College:	London College of Fashion, UAL
Course and year (if applicable):	BSc Psychology of Fashion
Unit for which this study is being conducted:	FMP
Study title:	Exploring the Impact of Microtrends on Fashion Identity and Subcultural Values

<p>The UAL codes of practice set out four key areas for ethical consideration. Which one or more of these ethical principles does this application for ethical consideration relate to?</p>	
<p>a. An ethics of care is supported by the Educational Ethics Sub-Committee as a positive ethic that is the University's responsibility to foster in relation to students, educational content, educational process including material resources, and in students' relations with anyone who participates or interacts with their work.</p>	<p><u>Yes</u> / No</p>
<p>b. The principle of social justice obliges the student to identify the risks and benefits of participation in creative or investigative practice. Any risks to persons participating should be weighed against any potential benefits – to the participants or the student, and also the wider benefits to society of the knowledge gained. As with the principle of respect for persons, there is a need to promote equality and racial justice and protect vulnerable groups.</p>	<p><u>Yes</u> / No</p>
<p>c. Respect for persons recognises the capacity and rights of all individuals to make their own choices and decisions. It refers to the autonomy and rights to self-determination of</p>	<p><u>Yes</u> / No</p>

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<p>all human beings, acknowledges their equality, dignity, freedom, and rights. An important component of this principle is the need to provide special protection to vulnerable persons, both students and in student activity involving others.</p>	
<p>d. Beneficence is the principle of acting for the good and well-being of others. It requires students to serve the interests of others. In so doing, students comply with the principle of neither doing, nor permitting, any foreseeable harm as a consequence of creative or investigative practice. This is the principle of non-maleficence, it is the principle of doing no harm.</p> <p>The specific duties of promoting equality and good relations are assumed under these principles, as defined by the Equality Act 2010.</p>	<p><u>Yes</u> / No</p>

1. Please provide the rationale behind your study, including a brief literature review, the gap in the existing literature that the study will address, study aims / research questions, and hypotheses (if the study has a quantitative component). Indicate whether the study is qualitative or quantitative and what design it will use. (600 words max, excluding references)

The fashion industry has witnessed a shift with the rise of **microtrends**, driven by platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Microtrends are short-lived aesthetic trends that rapidly gain popularity but are quickly replaced. Unlike traditional **subcultures**, which historically emphasised deeper values and stable aesthetics, microtrends focus heavily on visual aesthetics with minimal connection to identity or belief systems.

Research Gap:

While previous research highlights the role of social media in accelerating trend cycles (Rocamora, 2017) and impacting social identity development, particularly among younger audiences (Tafesh et al., 2021), there is

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limited empirical research on whether microtrends actively undermine subcultural values. This study aims to explore whether the rapid adoption of aesthetic-based trends is contributing to the decline of stable subcultural mindsets, replacing meaningful identity with superficial engagement.

Study Aims and Objectives:

This study aims to assess whether microtrends are diminishing subcultural values in fashion. Specifically, it will:

- Explore how participants describe their personal style and how it has evolved due to social media-driven microtrends.
- Investigate participants' experiences with fashion subcultures and microtrend engagement.
- Understand participants' perceptions of whether microtrends have shifted fashion away from meaningful identity.

Research Questions:

1. How do participants define microtrends?
2. Do participants perceive microtrends as superficial or meaningful?
3. Do participants feel that microtrends have weakened the values traditionally linked to fashion subcultures?

Methodology: This study will adopt a qualitative design to gather insights through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis will be applied to uncover recurring narratives about fashion identity, authenticity, and the social influence of trends.

Conclusion: This study will contribute to discussions about identity instability, social media influence, and the evolving role of fashion as a form of cultural expression. By exploring whether microtrends are replacing meaningful subcultural values, the research may offer insights into broader societal shifts in identity, individuality, and self-expression in the digital age.

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Conclusion:

This study will contribute to discussions about identity instability, social media influence, and the evolving role of fashion as a form of cultural expression. By exploring whether microtrends are replacing meaningful subcultural values, the research may offer valuable insights into broader societal shifts in identity, individuality, and self-expression in the digital age. The findings could provide a clearer understanding of how social media-driven trends are shaping future attitudes towards fashion, culture, and belonging.

References

Rocamora, A. (2017). *Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion*. *Fashion Theory*, 21(5), 505-522. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174117X15040902267476>

Tafesh, Z., Louaj, M., & Alazmeh, M. (2021). *The negative effects of social media on the social identity of adolescents*. *Heliyon*, 7(4), e06864. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06864>

2. Does your research involve participants?

	No*
X	Yes
*If you answer 'No', you do not need to complete Questions 3 to 11. Instead, please go to Question 12 and continue from there.	

3. Who will the participants be? Please tick as appropriate.

X	Students at University of the Arts London
	Staff at University of the Arts London
X	Other*
*If you answered 'Other' please specify below.	

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Participants will include individuals aged **18 and over** from the general public. There will be no restrictions based on gender, nationality, or occupation, ensuring a diverse range of participants.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Participants must be **18 years or older**.
- Participants must actively engage with **social media platforms** such as Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook to ensure familiarity with microtrends and online fashion content.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals currently experiencing a diagnosed psychological disorder that may affect their ability to participate in interviews or complete questionnaires will be excluded. This is to minimise potential distress.

Familiarity with Participants:

While some participants may be recruited through the researcher's social network (e.g., friends or acquaintances), this will not be the primary recruitment method. Recruitment will focus on **social media outreach** to reach a broader and more representative sample.

4. How will participants be recruited and how many will be involved?

Participants will be recruited through **social media platforms** such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook to ensure access to individuals actively engaged with online fashion content. A **recruitment post** will be created and shared on these platforms, outlining the purpose of the study, participant requirements, and instructions for expressing interest. This recruitment post will be included as an appendix in the ethics form submission.

Participants will be invited to take part in the study via **direct messages** and **comments** in response to engagement on the recruitment post. The post will include a clear statement that participation is voluntary, and individuals can withdraw at any stage.

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To ensure a sufficient data pool for analysis, the study will aim to recruit **15-20 participants**. This number is chosen to allow for diverse perspectives while remaining feasible within the study's timeline and scope.

5. What will participants be asked to do and for how long? Describe the entire study procedure, including the measures (e.g., questionnaires) or the interview questions that you will ask them to complete or answer.

Participants will follow the outlined procedure to ensure informed consent, data collection, and debriefing:

1. **Participant Information Sheet:** Participants will read a detailed information sheet.
2. **Consent Form:** Participants will confirm their willingness to participate.
3. **Interview:** Participants will engage in a 30-45 minute semi-structured interview to discuss their experiences with microtrends, social media engagement, and connections to subcultural values.
4. **Debriefing:** Participants will receive a debriefing sheet at the end of the study, explaining the purpose of the research and offering resources for further information or support if needed.

Data Collection Platform:

- **Interviews** will be conducted using **MS Teams as well as in-person**, as supported by UAL's data protection protocols.

Demographic Information:

Participants will be asked to provide the following demographic details as part of the interview:

- **Age**
- **Gender**
- **Nationality**
- **Social media usage habits** (e.g., platforms frequently used, time spent engaging with fashion content).

Interview Schedule:

- The semi-structured interview schedule has been developed by the researcher to align with the study's aims. Sample questions will be provided in the **Appendix**.

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6. What potential risks to the interests of participants do you foresee and what steps will you take to minimise those risks? How will you inform participants of the risks and the steps you are taking to address them? The BPS defines risk as the 'potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress to human participants that a research project may generate.' It includes risks to participants' well-being, self-esteem, social standing, values, privacy and reputation, beliefs, employment / livelihood, personal relationships, freedom, commercial interests (e.g., intellectual property), and so on.

Potential Risks:

This study is considered **minimal risk** according to the British Psychological Society (BPS) and University of the Arts London (UAL) ethics guidelines. However, the following potential risks have been identified, along with strategies to mitigate them:

1. Psychological Distress:

- Although unlikely, participants may feel discomfort when reflecting on their identity, fashion choices, or social media use during the interviews.
- **Mitigation:** Participants will be informed they may skip any questions they find distressing or uncomfortable. Additionally, participants can withdraw from the study without consequence at any stage during data collection or within one week afterward.

2. Emotional Triggers:

- Discussions about social pressures or personal identity may cause mild emotional discomfort.
- **Mitigation:** The debriefing sheet will provide participants with links to mental health resources, including:
 - **Mind charity support resources:** <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support>
 - **Samaritans helpline:** 116 123
 - **NHS mental health services:** <https://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/free-therapy-or-counselling.aspx>

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- Participants will also be encouraged to contact their GP if they feel ongoing distress.

3. Privacy and Data Protection:

- As the study involves personal opinions and, potentially, identifiable data (e.g., email addresses for interview scheduling), there is a risk of a data breach.
- **Mitigation:** All data will be stored securely on **UAL-managed systems**, such as OneDrive. Participants' real names will not be included in transcripts; instead, pseudonyms will be used. Audio recordings will be deleted immediately after transcription. Data will be stored for a maximum of **3 years** in accordance with UAL data protection policies. For in-person interviews, the audio recording will be transferred immediately from the recording device to the UAL OneDrive and subsequently deleted from this device. Email addresses will not be recorded into any of the documents that will be stored. Consent Forms, which contain participants' names, will be deleted once the dissertation has been graded and the grade has been confirmed by the Exam Board.

4. Potential Impact on Reputation or Social Standing:

- Participants may worry that their fashion preferences, subcultural alignment, or social media behaviours may be judged.
- **Mitigation:** All responses will be anonymised, and no identifying information will be included in the final report or presentation.

Risk Level and Justification:

Based on the BPS and UAL codes of ethics, this project is considered **minimal risk**. The research does not include vulnerable populations, highly sensitive topics, or invasive procedures. All necessary safeguards have been implemented to minimise potential risks.

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7. What potential risks do you foresee to yourself as the researcher and what steps will you take to minimise those risks? For example, does your research raise issues of personal safety for you or others involved in the project, especially if taking place outside working hours or off University premises?

This study is considered **minimal risk** to the researcher. However, the following potential risks have been identified, along with steps to mitigate them:

1. Emotional or Psychological Impact:

- Discussing topics such as identity or social pressures may result in participants sharing sensitive or distressing experiences.
- **Mitigation:** If the researcher feels affected by these discussions, they will contact **UAL Counselling Services** for emotional support.

2. Personal Safety During Data Collection:

- As some interviews may be conducted in person, there is a small risk to the researcher's safety when meeting participants.
- **Mitigation:** To ensure safety:
 - All in-person interviews will take place in **public spaces** during **daytime hours**.
 - The researcher will **inform a trusted friend or family member** of the meeting time, location, and expected duration before the interview.
 - Following recruitment, participants will be contacted **only through the researcher's UAL email address** to ensure professional boundaries. No personal contact details will be shared.

3. Online Risks:

- Conducting some interviews via **MS Teams** carries minimal risk. However, there is a small chance that participants may behave inappropriately during online interactions.

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- **Mitigation:** If inappropriate behaviour occurs, the researcher will terminate the interview immediately and report the incident to the relevant UAL staff.

Risk Level and Justification:

Based on the nature of the study and the planned mitigation steps, the research poses **minimal risk** to the researcher. All interactions will follow UAL's recommended safety protocols to ensure well-being.

8. Please attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Debriefing Sheet you plan to give participants.	
X	Please tick here if the Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Debriefing Sheet are attached in the appendix at the end of this form.

9. Does your project involve children / minors (anyone under the age of 18) or vulnerable adults? The BPS states that vulnerable populations include 'children, persons lacking capacity, those in a dependent or unequal relationship, people with learning or communication difficulties, people in care, people in custody or on probation, people who have suffered physical or psychological trauma and people engaged in illegal activities, such as drug abuse.'	
x	No. Go to Question 10
	Yes*
*If you answer 'Yes', you may need to obtain a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and seek ethical approval from the relevant UAL ethics sub-committee. Discuss this with your Supervisor, Unit Leader, or Course Leader. Please be aware that a DBS check normally takes 4 weeks, but can take longer.	
	I confirm that I have obtained a DBS check.

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	I understand that I need to go through the PREP review and the UAL ethics review process.
--	---

Please Note:

It is a presumption of academic research that, wherever possible and feasible, the information on which the research is based should be preserved, so that it can be made available to future researchers. However, the privacy of participants must be respected. Please refer to the UAL and BPS ethics codes before answering Question 10.

10. Will you be obtaining personal information (e.g., name; postal, email, or IP address; recorded images or audio; date of birth) from the participants?

	No. Go to Question 11
x	Yes*

***If you answer 'Yes', please give details. In your response, please indicate:** Why do you need to collect personal information from participants? How will you store and use this information during the course of your research in line with the Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)? What parts of this information will need to be confidential? How will you ensure that no one can link participants' identity to the rest of their data? Will you exhibit or publish the information? Who will have access to the data? Will you retain information after the research is concluded? If yes, how? If information is to be destroyed, explain why this is appropriate.

Participants' names are being collected in the Consent Form. These forms will be deleted once the dissertation has been graded and the grade has been confirmed by the Exam Board. Until then, they will be stored separately from the interview transcripts. No one outside the research team will be able to link the forms to the corresponding transcript.

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11. Will payments to participants be made?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No. Go to Question 12
	Yes*
*If you answer 'Yes', please state amount and whether payment is for out-of-pocket expenses or a fee.	
NA	

12. If the project is to receive financial support from outside the University, please give details. Include any restrictions that have been imposed on the conduct of the research by the funding body or sponsor. Both financial propriety and the protection of commercial rights are important for you, the University, and other third parties (e.g., sponsors, participants).	
NA	

13. Will any restrictions be placed on the publication of results?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No. Go to Question 14
	Yes*
*If you answer 'Yes', please state the nature of the restrictions (e.g., details of any confidentiality agreement).	
NA	

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Student Declaration:

15. I confirm my responsibility to deliver the project in accordance with the Code of Practice on Research Ethics and the Code of Practice on Educational Ethics of the University of the Arts London (the University), as well as the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics. In signing this form, I am also confirming that:

- a) The form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
- b) There is no potential material interest that may, or may appear to, impair the independence and objectivity of the researchers conducting this project.
- c) I understand that I cannot start data collection until I have received ethical approval from the relevant ethics body (e.g., PREP).
- d) I undertake to conduct the study as set out in this application unless deviation is agreed by the University and to comply with any conditions set out in the letter sent by the relevant ethics body (e.g., PREP).
- e) I understand that, if I decide to make substantial changes to the study method (e.g., the design, participant recruitment method, procedure), I will need to submit a revised ethics form.
- f) I will store data on UAL-managed systems and will follow the [data protection principles](#) at all times.
- g) I understand and accept that the ethical propriety of this project may be monitored by the relevant College Research body and/or Educational Ethics Sub-Committee.

Signature of Student:

AMHALL

Date (dd/mm/yyyy):

17/03/2025

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Unit Leader or Supervisor Declaration:	
16. I support this project and have reviewed and approved the current ethics application.	
Name:	Young-Jin Hur
Signature of Unit Leader or Supervisor:	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 400px; height: 40px;"></div>
Date (dd/mm/yyyy):	24.03.25.

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Section B

for ual committee use only

Approval of Psychology Research Ethics Panel:									
<p>▪ The Psychology reviewers recommend that:</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 5%; text-align: center;"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> <td>This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as minimal ethical risk.</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as more than minimal ethical and so will be forwarded to the University's Educational Ethics Sub-Committee for approval.</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted after the student has made required modifications indicated in the PREP's feedback.</td> </tr> </table>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as minimal ethical risk .	<input type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as more than minimal ethical and so will be forwarded to the University's Educational Ethics Sub-Committee for approval.	<input type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted after the student has made required modifications indicated in the PREP's feedback.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as minimal ethical risk .								
<input type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as more than minimal ethical and so will be forwarded to the University's Educational Ethics Sub-Committee for approval.								
<input type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted after the student has made required modifications indicated in the PREP's feedback.								
Name of Reviewer 1 (Psychology Team Member / Unit Leader / Supervisor)	Young-Jin Hur	Date <i>(dd/mm/yyyy)</i>	24.03.25.						
Name of Reviewer 2 (PREP Chair / Deputy Chair)	Dr Soljana Çili	Date <i>(dd/mm/yyyy)</i>	26.03.2025						
Signature	<p>Reviewer 1 Reviewer 2</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 250px; height: 30px; margin: 0 auto;"></div> <p style="color: blue; font-family: cursive; font-size: 1.2em; margin-top: 10px;">Soljana Çili</p>								

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<p>Approval of University's Educational Ethics Sub-Committee (EESC): All 'more than minimal risk' documents will be sent to EESC.</p>			
<p>▪ The Educational Ethics Subcommittee (EESC) recommends that:</p>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as minimal ethical risk		
<input type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as more than minimal ethical risk		
<input type="checkbox"/>	This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted, and the following modifications should be made (see below):		
Required Modifications List <i>(if applicable)</i>	1)		
Suggested Modifications List <i>(if applicable)</i>	1)		
Name		Date <i>(dd/mm/yyyy)</i>	
Signature <i>Chair of EESC</i>			

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Version 1.0, Dated 17/03/2025

Study title: Exploring the Impact of Microtrends on Subcultural Values

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Introduction

My name is Annabelle Hall and I am a student at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London (UAL). You are being invited to take part in the above research study.

Before you decide whether you would like to take part or not, it is important that you understand what the study involves. Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear or if you would like more information. If you are happy to participate, you will be asked to provide consent before engaging with the study.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to investigate how engagement with social media-driven microtrends affects fashion identity, subcultural values, and people's perceptions of themselves.

Who can take part in this study?

This study is open to anyone aged **18 years or older** who engages with fashion trends or social media. Participants must be willing to take part in an interview.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not wish to.

What will I be required to do if I take part?

You will be invited to participate in a **30-45-minute interview** (via MS Teams or in-person) to discuss your experiences with fashion trends, microtrends, and subcultural identities. All interviews will be audio recorded.

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What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

This study is considered **minimal risk** according to UAL and British Psychological Society guidelines. However, reflecting on fashion identity, social media usage, or aesthetic pressures may cause minor discomfort. You can skip any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. A debriefing sheet will include links to mental health resources should you feel affected.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

While there is no financial compensation, your contribution will help expand knowledge in fashion psychology. Your insights may help inform future fashion research, brand strategies, and consumer awareness.

How will my information be used?

Your responses will remain confidential and anonymised.

You can stop taking part in the study at any time while completing it, without giving a reason, and without experiencing any detriment.

As the study is qualitative, you may request to withdraw your data within **one week** after completing the interview by emailing the researcher. All recordings and transcriptions will be deleted upon your request.

All data will be accessible to me and relevant staff at London College of Fashion. The interview audio files will be deleted as soon as the interviews have been transcribed. The transcripts will be analysed while stored on UAL-managed systems. These transcripts will not contain your name or any information that may lead to your identification. Names, for example, will be replaced with pseudonyms. The anonymised interview transcripts will be stored on systems managed by UAL for a period of **3 years** after the end of the project. The Consent Form, which will include your name, will also be stored on UAL-managed systems,

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separately from the rest of your data, and will be deleted after this research has been assessed and the grade has been confirmed by London College of Fashion. No one except the researcher and relevant staff at London College of Fashion will be able to link any identifying information to the rest of your responses.

You can find more information about UAL and your privacy rights at

www.arts.ac.uk/privacy-information.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results will be written up as part of a dissertation project for the BSc Psychology of Fashion course. Findings may also be published in an academic journal or presented at conferences. Any published data will be anonymised to ensure participant confidentiality.

Who should I contact for further information?

If you have any questions, require more information about this study, or would like to receive a summary of the study results when they are ready, please email me, the researcher, at a.hall1020211@arts.ac.uk

What happens if there is a problem?

This study has been approved by the Psychology Research Ethics Panel at London College of Fashion, UAL. If you have any concerns about the study, you can contact Young-Jin Hur at y.hur@fashion.arts.ac.uk. They will do their best to answer your query. If you have further concerns or wish to complain about the study, please contact researchethics@arts.ac.uk.

Thank you for reading this Information Sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

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CONSENT FORM**Version 1.0, Dated 17/03/2025****Study title:** Exploring the Impact of Microtrends on Subcultural Values**Researcher's name:** Annabelle Hall

Please complete this form after you have read the Participant Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to participate.

If you decide to participate, please tick each of the boxes below to consent to different elements of this study. Please note that you may be deemed ineligible to participate if you do not consent to any of the elements.

.

Item no.	Item	Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I confirm that I am 18 years old or older.	

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3.	I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.	
4.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to one week after my interview without giving a reason, and without suffering any adverse consequences or penalty.	
5.	I understand how my data will be stored and consent to the processing of all data for the purposes explained to me.	
6.	I understand the potential disadvantages and risks of participating and the support that will be available to me should I become distressed during the course of the research.	
7.	I understand that confidentiality will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any reports or publications.	
8.	I consent to my interview being audio recorded.	
9.	I consent to my data, including anonymised quotes, being used in written up or published work resulting from this research.	
10.	I understand that honesty is important to the research and will do my best to answer the questions accurately and honestly.	
11.	I agree to take part in this study.	

Name of Participant**Date****Signature**

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Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

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DEBRIEFING SHEET

Version 1.0, Dated 17/03/2025

Study title: Exploring the impact of microtrends on subcultural values

Researcher's name: Annabelle Hall

Researcher's email address: a.hall10202112@arts.ac.uk

Thank you for taking part in this study! Below is some more information about the aims of the study and what happens next.

What are the aims of this study?

This study aims to investigate how engagement with social media-driven microtrends influences fashion identity, subcultural values, and self-concept clarity (i.e., the extent to which people are clear about who they are).

What are some of the benefits that may result from this study?

Your contribution will provide valuable insights into how fashion trends shape identity and influence consumer habits. The study may also contribute to research in fashion psychology, identity theory, and consumer behaviour, which can inform marketing strategies, brand development, and cultural studies.

What should you do if you need support at the end of the study?

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If you feel affected by any of the study's content, you can contact your GP or family doctor, who can guide you to local psychological services. If you are based in the UK, you can also seek support from the following resources:

- **Mind charity support resources:** <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support>
- **Samaritans helpline:** 116 123
- **NHS mental health services:** <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health>

Contact details

If you have more questions about the study or would like to request a summary of the findings when they are ready, please contact me using the email address provided above. If this study has harmed you in any way or you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study, you can contact researchethics@arts.ac.uk.

Thank you once again for your contribution to the study!

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APPENDICES

Interview Questions:

Identity & Self-Concept

1. How would you describe your personal style?
2. Does social media influence how you perceive your fashion identity? If so, how?
3. Have you ever changed your style because of a viral trend? Can you describe that experience?

Microtrends & Social Media

4. How would you define microtrends? Can you think of any recent examples?
5. Have you ever changed your style due to viral trends? Can you describe that experience?
6. Do you feel social media algorithms influence your interest in certain aesthetics or fashion styles?
7. Do you think social media has increased pressure to constantly change your fashion style?
8. Why do you think microtrends exist, and what drives them?

Subculture & Fashion Communities

7. Do you believe fashion subcultures still exist today? Why or why not?
8. Have you ever felt part of a distinct fashion subculture or aesthetic movement? If yes, how did this shape your identity?
9. What is the relationship between microtrends and subcultures?

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10. Do you think microtrends are contributing to the decline of long-term fashion subcultures?

Emotional & Psychological Impact

10. What role does social media play in perpetuating microtrends and subcultures?
11. Has social media made it harder to stay true to your personal style? If so, how?
12. Do you think your fashion choices are influenced more by social media or by personal values?

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Advert:

Calling All Fashion Enthusiasts!

Are you passionate about fashion trends and their influence on identity? I'm conducting a study exploring how social media-driven microtrends are impacting personal style and subculture values.

I'm looking for participants aged **18 and over** to take part in a **casual one-on-one interview** (online or in-person) which will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any moment in the interview if you feel like it.

Your insights will help expand knowledge within fashion psychology.

If you're interested or have any questions, please email me at **a.hall1020211@arts.ac.uk**. I'd love to hear from you!