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The Rise of Dupe Culture: A Qualitative Study on the Construction of an Emergent Digital Consumer Culture

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Abstract

Title: The Rise of Dupe Culture: A Qualitative Study on the Construction of an Emergent Digital Consumer Culture

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Thesis Purpose: This thesis aims to explore the construction and dynamics of 'dupe culture' as an emergent digital consumer culture, examining its implications for brand authenticity, consumer identity, and branding within the digital age.

Theoretical perspective: The study takes on a consumer culture perspective, using the Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al. 1997) and insights from scholars within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) to analyze the cultural and social dynamics shaping a digital consumer culture.

Methodology & Empirical data: Adopting a qualitative research approach, this study conducts semi-structured interviews with Gen Z consumers who actively participate in dupe culture. This method facilitates an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and perspectives within this consumer culture.

Findings & Conclusions: The dupe culture was found to be constructed and reproduced through social media. Furthermore, dupe culture was found to be a countercultural movement to brands, through informed consumption habits, a disregard for brands and logos and an evolving notion of brand authenticity.

Implications: This study examines an emerging digital consumer culture, with results contributing to cultural theory and counterfeit literature by exploring the dupe culture in its digital context. This thesis opens for further research in digital consumer cultures, brand authenticity and branding.

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1. Introduction

"Why would you spend, for example, twice as much if you can buy
it cheaper and spend money on other things as well?"

Counterfeit products are unauthorized replicas of trademarked or copyrighted goods (Bloch et al., 1993), typically sold at lower prices and of inferior quality compared to the genuine and original brands (Lai & Zaichowsky, 1999; Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2008). Counterfeiting harms legitimate businesses by causing lost sales, damage to brand reputation, and job losses (Bloch et al. 1993). As a result, much academic research has focused on brand protection and consumer motivations behind counterfeit consumption (Bloch et al. 1993; Hamelin et al. 2013).

More recently, the growth of the internet and e-commerce platforms has supported the development of a counterfeiting culture (Khachatryan, 2023). Counterfeit products take the competitive advantage secured by the original brand and illegally recreate that advantage for themselves (Bloch et al. 1993; Wilcox et al. 2009). Marketing research has traditionally made a clear distinction between authentic and counterfeit products. Hietanen et al. (2020) problematize this distinction and discuss the complex relationship between authentic and counterfeit goods in luxury markets. Brand authenticity is a concept that has been defined as "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves" (Morhart et al. 2015, p. 202). Further, Hietanen et al. (2020) argue that the notion of brand authenticity is becoming increasingly ambiguous in a society of industrial production, suggesting that the line between authentic and counterfeit is blurring, with luxury brands representing a form of "commodified authenticity". The authenticity of a product is less about its materiality and more about the brand and its place in a system of cultural signs and meanings, they argue (Hietanen et al. 2020). This raises questions about the value of brand authenticity in contemporary consumer cultures, and how consumers construct and understand authenticity and counterfeits. Furthermore, the consumption of counterfeit goods is not simply a matter of individual choice but is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts, which remains less explored in marketing research.

Counterfeit consumption has traditionally been driven by the desire to replicate brand associations and prestige (Hoe et al. 2003; Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2008), with consumers

willing to compromise on product quality as long as they could appropriate the brand symbolism (Gentry et al. 2001). However, as the quality of counterfeits has improved over the years (Wilcox et al., 2009), with some "superfakes" being almost identical to the genuine product (Dawkins, 2023), the focus is shifting to the product itself rather than just the brand. This potential shift in focus raises questions about the evolving role of brand authenticity in contemporary consumer cultures and challenges the assumption that counterfeiting is solely about appropriating brand associations and prestige. It suggests that the physical product attributes and features are becoming increasingly important to counterfeit consumers, rather than just the symbolic meaning of the brand.

Another important aspect regarding the developments within counterfeit consumption is digitalization. Cochoy et al. (2017) argue that consumer practices are increasingly intertwined and mediated by digital devices. They argue that the entire customer journey is increasingly managed through digital devices, social media, and corporate websites. Consumers seek out and co-produce recommendations and influence each other online, resulting in the construction of new consumption practices (Cochoy et al. 2017). In turn, the increasingly blurred boundaries between physical and online consumption have significant implications for consumer culture (Cochoy et al. 2017; Dey et al. 2020). These changing dynamics prompt us to rethink traditional understandings of consumer practices in the digital age.

While there has been extensive research on consumers' interactions with digital media (Kozinets & Cereno, 2014; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016), there is still a lack of socio-cultural understanding (Cochoy et al. 2017). Dey et al. (2020) address this by introducing the concept of 'digital consumer culture', which they define as "the shared sets of consumption behavior that directly or indirectly emanate from people's interactions with digital technologies, such as the internet, social media, mobile devices and applications" (p. 2). They also highlight the increasingly intertwined nature of consumer culture, blurring the boundaries between physical and online aspects of consumption.

Adopting a cultural perspective is important for understanding contemporary consumer cultures, as Holt (2004) points out. He critiques traditional branding approaches that view consumers purely as individual targets to be influenced, arguing instead that brands must be understood as cultural artifacts imbued with symbolic meanings co-constructed by consumers within particular cultural contexts (Holt, 2004). Critically, Holt (2002, p.70) presents a dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding, claiming that "Brands are today under

attack by an emerging countercultural movement". Holt (2002) explains that postmodern brands are using increasingly risky and aggressive tactics to create such perceived authenticity among consumers. These tactics have not gone unnoticed by consumers and, in turn, these branding practices are creating tensions and contradictions, leading to anti-brand movements in Western society, Holt (2002) argues.

Although Holt's (2002; 2004) observations were made over two decades ago, the complexity of branding and consumer cultures has only increased since then. From this perspective, consumer practices around brands cannot be reduced to just personal preferences, but must need to be analyzed as expressions of broader cultural tensions, identity formations, and evolving meanings within society. Failure to adopt this cultural approach limits our ability to fully understand the dynamic interaction between consumer practices, brand authenticity and the socio-cultural environment in which they are situated.

As we consider the complexities of today's consumer culture, it becomes clear that the fields of branding and consumer culture are undergoing a paradigm shift. Traditional marketing and branding research often adopts a managerial lens, focusing primarily on strategies for market success, while overlooking the cultural dimensions at play. Conversely, consumer culture research, while theoretically rich, needs to keep up pace with the rapid digital transformation and the cultural shifts it brings about. Moreover, brand authenticity is a complex issue in both streams of research. A holistic approach that explores the intersection of these perspectives is needed to understand the challenges and opportunities presented by the evolving dynamics of authenticity and consumer culture in the digital age.

1.1 The Emergent Dupe Culture

An emerging digital consumer culture, known as "dupe culture," is challenging the concept of brand authenticity. Dupes, short for duplicates, are products that mimic the appearance and functionality of higher-end products at a fraction of the cost (Elledge, 2023; Proctor, 2023). Dupes may not be exact replicas, but they achieve a similar effect as the original branded product (Jones, 2022; Payne, 2023).

Although the terms may seem similar, it is important to distinguish between dupes and counterfeits. While dupes are heavily inspired by another product, they do not infringe intellectual property rights because they avoid the use of trademarks, logos or explicit references to the original brand (Shamsian, 2023; Pullen, 2023), making traditional legal

action against them difficult (OpSec, 2024). However, even when producers of dupes do not explicitly state that they are imitating someone else's product, the similarity between them is generally considered intentional (Payne, 2023). While there should be a clear distinction made between the two terms, the previous research on counterfeiting is highly relevant to dupe culture and consumption.

Social media is a major driver in the acceleration of dupe culture (Crumley, 2023). On TikTok, videos tagged with #dupe have collectively received over six billion views (Solá, 2023). Remarkably, in some cases, online searches for dupes have surpassed those for the original brands, as evidenced by the spike in Amazon searches for dupes of the popular clothing brand Skims (The Fashion Law, 2023). According to a study by Morning Consult, 49% of Gen Z and 44% of Millennials have intentionally purchased a dupe product (Briggs, 2023). While the frequency of dupe purchases is comparatively lower among other generations, Briggs (2023) suggests that this trend is likely to increase as information about dupes becomes more widely available to them.

Dupe culture still remains unexplored in consumer research, yet it is an intriguing example of an emergent digital consumer culture. We argue that dupe culture serves as a compelling example of an emerging digital consumer culture. By exploring the construction of this culture, we can gain valuable insights into broader digital consumer cultures and this contemporary counterfeit phenomenon.

While buying counterfeits or knockoffs is generally frowned upon, dupe shopping has gained widespread acceptance among consumers (Crumley, 2023; Pullen, 2023). The legality of dupe products also appears to contribute to their positive reception (Elledge, 2023). This acceptance challenges traditional notions of brand authenticity and leads to a reassessment of what constitutes authentic consumption in the digital age.

Hence, the problems that arise in relation to dupe culture challenge traditional ideas of branding and authenticity. While previous research suggests that brand authenticity and brand loyalty are important in consumer decision making (Hernandez-Fernandez, 2019; Catic et al. 2022; Beverland, 2005), the growth of dupe culture challenges these assumptions. This can be linked to Hietanen et al.'s (2020) discussion of the complex relationship between authenticity and counterfeit goods in luxury markets. While they navigated a non-digital context with traditional counterfeit products, dupes seems to occupy a gray area that is

neither fully authentic nor fully counterfeit, further challenging the complex ideas of authenticity. Moreover, the emergence of dupe culture is interesting in relation to Holt's (2002) arguments about authenticity and counter-cultural movements towards brands. We argue that the normalization of buying dupe products has interesting implications for the value and meaning of brands and authenticity for consumers.

Previous research on counterfeiting has mostly considered only original branded products as authentic (Bloch et al. 1993; Hamelin et al. 2013), and since they have also used psychological theories, they have failed to acknowledge the complex cultural meanings and contexts that construct notions of brand authenticity. We need to understand the culture and meaning systems that construct why something is perceived as authentic or not. Culture, from our perspective, refers to the shared values, practices, and meanings that shape how a group of consumers explains and engages with the world around them. The cultural perspective is important because consumption practices are not just individual choices, but are deeply integrated in broader socio-cultural contexts that give symbolic meaning to products and brands (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). By adopting a cultural approach, we can better understand how consumer cultures, such as dupe culture, are constructed through the interaction of collective meanings, social interactions, and identity formation processes.

Dupe culture exists in a digital environment, making it a compelling phenomenon to examine at the intersection of brand authenticity, digitalization and culture. Understanding the shift in consumer perceptions of dupe products and how it relates to consumer culture requires deeper investigation. Despite the widespread presence of digital consumer cultures, there remains a notable lack of academic research on the topic. Exploring the construction of dupe culture can provide important insights into the construction of contemporary consumer cultures and their broader implications.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this thesis is to examine the construction of a digital consumer culture around counterfeits. As an example, we study the consumer culture surrounding dupes on social media. We seek to investigate the complex relationship between brand authenticity, counterfeits and consumer cultures. Through this study, we aim to contribute with nuanced insight to consumer culture studies, expanding it with a critically needed digital perspective on counterfeit consumption. By examining how dupe culture is shaped by and shapes social

media, this research seeks to broaden the understanding of contemporary consumer cultures, counterfeits and their implications for consumer practices in the digital age.

To answer this aim, the study will address the following research questions:

- How is the emerging dupe culture constructed in practice?
- What characterizes dupe culture?

To answer the research questions, we will use the Circuit of Culture by Du Gay et al. (1997) to trace the construction of dupe culture from a consumer perspective. The Circuit of Culture provides an understanding of the process of constructing and reproducing culture for cultural artifacts. By applying this model to dupe culture in a digital context, we aim to not only to gain insights into the construction of the consumer culture itself, but also to test and possibly extend the model's applicability to digital consumer cultures. In addition to this, various aspects from scholars within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) will be used to deepen the analysis and understanding of the construction of digital consumer cultures.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into six main chapters. The first chapter serves as an *introduction* to the research topic, providing background information, formulating the problem, and outlining the study's *aim and research questions*. The second chapter reviews the existing *literature* on counterfeit products providing relevant background for understanding the research context. The third chapter details the *theoretical approach,* primarily exploring Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) as our theoretical lens and the Circuit of Culture model (Du Gay et al. 1997) as the guiding framework for the thesis. The fourth chapter describes the research *methodology,* including the methods used to collect empirical material, the selection of participants, and our approach to empirical analysis. It also addresses the *ethical and methodological considerations* made. The fifth chapter presents the *empirical findings* in relation to the theoretical approach, *analyzing* how the dupe culture is constructed using the Circuit of Culture. In the sixth chapter discusses the findings, while the seventh and final chapte*r concludes* the study by summarizing the findings, discussing their implications and suggesting future research directions.

2. Literature Review

This section presents and discusses relevant previous research, which is essential for understanding the research phenomenon and addressing our research questions.

2.1 Previous Research on Counterfeit Products

This study is positioned in relation to previous research on counterfeit consumption and brand authenticity. Examining previous research on counterfeit products provides us with a solid groundwork for understanding this similar, yet relatively unexplored, emerging phenomenon of consumer culture. By recognizing the similarities between these two phenomena and building on existing knowledge, we can deepen our understanding of dupe culture.

2.1.1 Counterfeit Consumption

Counterfeit products are unauthorized copies of trademarked or copyrighted goods (Bloch et al. 1993), which tend to be cheaper and of lower quality than the imitated brand (Lai & Zaichowsky, 1999; Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2008). They are often produced in countries with low labor costs and weak enforcement of trademark-protection laws (Grossman & Shapiro, 1986). The practice of counterfeiting is known to cause harm to legitimate businesses through lost sales, damaged brands, and lost jobs (Bloch et al. 1993).

The distinction between what is considered authentic and what is illicitly counterfeit has generally received much academic interest (Hietanen et al. 2020). The aspect of authenticity has been seen as something almost magical in its ambiguity and metaphysicality (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), where luxury goods can be used as signs that radiate prestige and excess (Yuran, 2016). On the other hand, counterfeit consumption and goods have been seen as illegitimate and something that only consumers without morals or knowledge would be attracted to (Bloch et al. 1993; Hamelin et al. 2013).

It has been assumed that only original brands can be authentic, as opposed to counterfeit brands. Hietanen et al. (2020) challenge this idea, suggesting that the line between the authentic and the counterfeit is blurred in luxury markets. They argue for tensions between the notion of authenticity and the commodity market in which luxury brands exist, referring to luxury brands as appearing as a “commodified authenticity”. In a society where, according to Baudrillad (1988), all consumption is commodified and without connection to reality, they question whether branded luxury goods can even be authentic at all, or whether modern

consumer markets fetishize authenticity because it is precisely what is lacking in the commodities they offer (Hietanen et al. 2020). Furthermore, they argue that the tendency to view counterfeits as *"*mere inferior copies" (p.37) fails to acknowledge the complex interplay of symbolic meanings at play (Hietanen et al. 2020). Hietanen et al. (2020) focused on branded luxury, where the brand visibility is highly visible on the counterfeit goods. Dupe culture, on the other hand, is defined by the opposite, where the original brand is nowhere to be found (Shamsian, 2023; Pullen, 2023). This makes for an interesting contrast, as the line between what is authentic and what is not can be argued to be even more blurred in this case.

The quality of counterfeit goods has evolved over the years. When Grossman and Shapiro (1986) wrote their paper on such products in the eighties, they claimed that counterfeits generally of "much lower quality than the authentic goods they imitate" (p.3). Gentry et al. (2001) suggest that the quality of counterfeits range on a spectrum, offering different quality options with price corresponding with the quality. In contrast, Wilcox et al. (2009) explain how the quality of counterfeits has improved over the years, sometimes reashing the level of the original luxury products. This is partly due to the luxury manufacturers themselves, who are increasingly outsourcing their production to reduce production costs and improve margins (Wilcox et al. 2009; Li et al. 2020). Counterfeit products are now often produced with the same designs, specifications, and shapes as the original brand, but with inferior materials (Parloff, 2006). Recently, there has been a rise in "superfakes", or counterfeits that are of nearly identical in design and quality to luxury products, making them difficult to differentiate from their original counterparts (Dawkins, 2023).

Wilcox et al. (2009) suggest that the conspicuousness of luxury brands (i.e. prominent logos and stylistic elements) increases their vulnerability to counterfeiting, thereby fostering the spread of counterfeit products. The conspicuousness of these brands makes it easier for consumers to replicate the brand's associations by purchasing counterfeit versions, especially when branding elements are easily imitated. Similarly, Gentry et al. (2001) found that brand insignia received more attention than tangible counterfeit product attributes. Consequently, Wilcox et al. (2009) argue that luxury brand marketers must carefully consider whether reducing the prominence of conspicuous brand elements would be beneficial or whether it would risk dampening demand for the authentic brand.

Additionally, digital media has added another layer of complexity to the problem of authenticity. In an era where digital content can be easily manipulated and spread,

determining what is authentic has become increasingly difficult. From edited photos to fabricated reviews, digital media has blurred the lines between reality and fiction (Ferreira et al. 2021), making it difficult for consumers to distinguish genuine products and experiences from counterfeit or deceptive ones.

2.1.2 Driving Factors of Counterfeit Consumption

Understanding counterfeit consumption requires an understanding of the meaning that luxury consumption holds for consumers. Much of consumer desire for luxury is derived from the pursuit of status (Dubois et al. 2021). Kapferer (2012) describes luxury brands for consumers as equivalent to medals for military officers, in that they are both a personal reward and a signal to others of where they stand in the social hierarchy.

Financial reasons are most often cited as the main driving factor in consumers choose counterfeit goods over the genuine product (Bloch et al. 1993). However, counterfeit goods are often more expensive than generic products of comparable quality. This suggests that consumers value the prestige associated with the counterfeitet label and what it signals, and are willing to pay more, though not the original price (Grossman & Shapiro, 1986).

Wilcox et al. (2009) suggest that social motivations are the main factor in what motivates consumers to consume counterfeit luxury goods. Their role seems to be mainly as a substitute for luxury brands, as a tool to help construct the consumer's social identity in line with the associations sought after by wearing branded products (Hoe et al. 2003). Similarly, Eisen and Schuchert-Güler (2008) suggest that consumers purchase counterfeits as a form of self-extension, attempting to portray themselves as people who can afford luxury products as a means of fitting in. They also emphasize the cultural aspects of counterfeit consumption, where attitudes and moral justifications may differ depending on the cultural context (Eisen & Schuchert-Güler, 2008).

Gentry et al. (2001) argue that counterfeits act as a trial for many consumers, in order to evaluate whether the authentic product is worth the price. They found that counterfeits generally act as an acceptable compromise, providing less value but at a lower cost. Most importantly, Gentry et al. (2001) found that counterfeiting is a brand decision rather than a product decision, with consumers seeking specific brand associations being willing to compromise on the product and quality. They suggest that consumers are willing to separate

brand from product, claiming that “counterfeits are only good as long as they are counterfeits of some brand” (Gentry et al. 2001, p. 264).

The literature provides valuable insights into the meanings attached to counterfeit consumption and the role of luxury brands in shaping consumer practices. However, there are some aspects that can be considered as mising in the existing research. In general, previous research has taken an overly managerial perspective held in previous research, often ignoring the complex cultural aspects at play. It also tends to focus primarily on individual psychology and economic factors, yet again failing to consider the broader socio-cultural context. Furthermore, it generally fails to acknowledge that consumer practices are not just about individual desires but also about how individuals position themselves within cultural contexts and communities. By emphasizing mainly individual aspects of identity, such as status seeking and self-extension, it fails to recognize the importance of social dynamics and cultural meanings embedded in consumer practices. To enrich the analysis, insights from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) are valuable. CCT highlights the socio-cultural aspects of consumption, emphasizing that consumers do not simply purchase products but also buy into and contribute to specific cultural systems and identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Using a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) approach, researchers can examine how consumption involves not only personal desires for status, but also participation in consumer cultures that are influenced by social interactions and cultural meanings.

In addition, another notable lack in the literature is attention to post-purchase practices and the long-term implications of counterfeit consumption. While focusing on motivations for initial purchase is important, understanding what happens after consumers purchase counterfeit goods is also essential. Post-purchase experiences, including satisfaction, disappointment, and the consequences of consumption decisions, can provide valuable insights into the complexities of consumption and its effects on individual consumers and consumer culture.

2.1.3 Tensions in Counterfeit Consuming

While counterfeit consumption has benefits in terms of price and social identity construction, it can also create tensions for the consumer (Dubois et al. 2021). According to Eisend and Schuchert-Güler (2008), counterfeit consumers often attempt to legitimize and rationalize their practices through various coping mechanisms, experiencing a form of cognitive dissonance. Such coping mechanisms include devaluing the purchase, seeing it as a good

deal, and demonizing the price of the original products as compared to the counterfeit (Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2008). In a similar vein , Li et al. (2020) conducted a study that explored how consumers construct their identities through the consumption of counterfeit luxury goods, and further explored strategies used both before and after the purchase to minimize the risk of being caught. The idea of being socially caught with counterfeit luxury products creates a reluctance to use them because it could have a negative impact on 'social face', an important concept especially in collectivist cultures (Li et al. 2020).

While the literature offers insights into the psychological coping mechanisms of counterfeit consumers, it overlooks the importance of understanding consumer practices within a socio-cultural context. By emphasizing only individual cognitive processes, it fails to capture the relational and contextual aspects that shape consumer practices. This narrow focus limits the ability to fully understand the complexities of counterfeit consumption and its broader societal implications. By adopting a cultural perspective, however, consumer research could explore how counterfeit consumption is not only about individual rationalization but also about navigating social identities and relationships within consumer cultures. Moreover, rather than just studying what happens in the minds of consumers, it is important to explore the interactions between consumers and their social environments. By shifting the focus to interactions between consumers, the literature could reveal how social media platforms facilitate and shape counterfeit consumption practices, including the emergence of dupe culture.

3. Theoretical Approach

In this section, we explore the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective within which this thesis is positioned. We introduce the Circuit of Culture as an analytical tool and theory to guide the analysis. In addition, this study draws from various aspects within CCT to provide a comprehensive analysis of consumer culture. Through these lenses and tools, we create the theoretical approach that will be used to examine the construction of digital consumer cultures.

3.1 A Cultural Perspective on Dupes

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is a family of theoretical perspectives and aspects that examine the "dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868). Rather than viewing culture as uniform,

CCT explores the diverse and dynamic distribution of meanings within society. It views consumer culture as a complex network in which market-driven consumption and marketing symbols play a central role, but individual choices in everyday life sustain and reproduce this system. CCT emphasizes that culture shapes but does not determine consumer practices, much like a framework within which individuals navigate, highlighting the fluid and fragmented nature of cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

The CCT research examines the entire consumption cycle, from acquisition, consumption, and possession to disposition (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It is also interested in many different aspects and practices, such as the symbolic, experiential, and contextual meanings of consumption in the context of culture. Broadly speaking, much of the research within this family of studies has explored how consumers find and adopt symbolic meaning in what and how they consume in order to construct and develop their individual and collective identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

In the current context of consumer culture, the emergence and widespread adoption of social media platforms have noticeably reshaped both consumer practices and cultural norms. This transformation is evident in the emergence of new digital consumer cultures, with dupe culture serving as a relevant case for understanding the multifaceted interactions between social media and consumer culture. In this context, the Circuit of Culture theory and other aspects within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) offer valuable theoretical insights for examining the complexities inherent in the construction of and participation in digital consumer cultures. Moreover, by integrating these theoretical approaches, we can develop a comprehensive and nuanced qualitative analysis to understand the construction and participation in dupe culture.

To explore the construction of digital consumer cultures, we use the Circuit of Culture, created by Du Gay et al. (1997). The Circuit of Culture provides a comprehensive tool and theory through which we will analyze the construction of the emergent dupe culture. By using the Circuit of Culture framework to guide our analysis, we seek to not only to understand the construction of dupe culture itself but also to examine the broader implications for contemporary consumer cultures in the digital age. Furthermore, by applying this framework to dupe culture, we seek to contribute to the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) by providing a much-needed digital perspective.

It is important to note that the theory of the Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al. 1997) also falls under a cultural theoretical perspective. Emerging from cultural studies, the Circuit of Culture addresses the complex interactions between representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation within cultural practices. Although CCT is a relatively new field in consumer research, it draws on theories and concepts, such as the Circuit of Culture, that are rooted in cultural studies.

Throughout the Circuit of Culture, additional aspects have been integrated with the elements to add depth to the theoretical approach. These aspects include different perspectives and theories from scholars within cultural studies and CCT. The relevance of these aspects is further motivated where they are presented in relation to the Circuit of Culture. In particular, scholars such as Baudrillard (1988) and Bourdieu (1979), although not traditionally considered part of CCT, are referenced by Du Gay et al. (1997) in their foundational work, reinforcing their relevance within the theoretical approach. In addition, scholars more closely associated with CCT, such as Holt (2002) and Belk (1988; 2013), contribute valuable insights to the field. Each of these theoretical aspects was selected for its ability to enrich our understanding of the complexities inherent in the phenomenon under study.

3.2 Circuit of Culture

The Circuit of Culture (See Figure 1) is a theory and analytical tool created for understanding how culture is produced and reproduced. The tool will be used to trace the construction of dupe culture in the analysis of this thesis, giving guidance for understanding the dynamic process in the construction of a consumer culture. The model was first introduced by sociologist Paul Du Gay, together with other scholars, in their book *Doing Cultural Studies* (1997). The circuit was based on previous models by Johnson (1986), and Hall (1973).

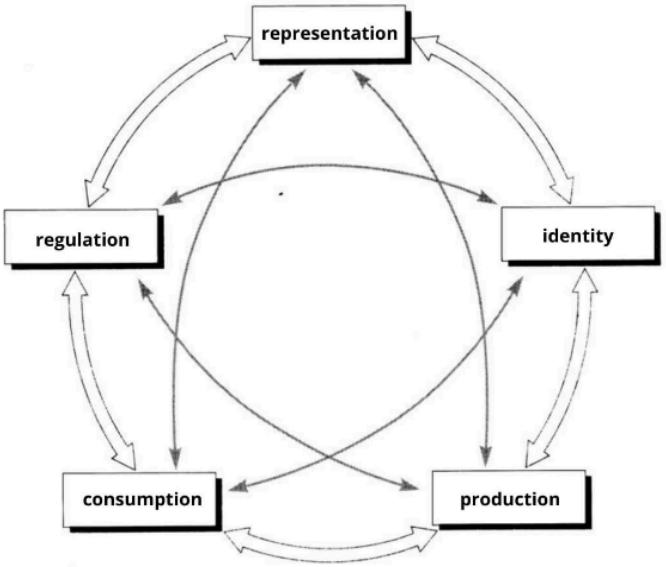

Figure 1: The Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al. 1997)

The Circuit of Culture consists of five dynamic and interconnected components, *representation, identity, production, consumption* and *regulation*, which together provide a holistic view of the processes involved in producing culture. The components of the model are not linear, but rather are interrelated and circulating, reflecting the dynamic and interactive nature of culture (Du Gay et al. 1997).

In the book where the model was introduced, Du Gay et al. (1997) examined the Sony Walkman, the personal stereo device made popular in the early eighties. They use the Walkman as a case for investigating how intangible cultural meanings are imbued in physical objects, giving insight into the creation of shared meaning and social practices in culture at large. While the circuit originally was created for understanding cultural artifacts, the authors argue that these artifacts are symbolic for developments in culture as a wider context.

A world of meaning has been constructed around and attached to the Walkman, making it a cultural artifact, argues Du Gay et al. (1997). There are distinct meanings, images and practices that are attached to the device. It can be seen as a sign or symbol that communicates other things. They argue that the Walkman not only is part of culture at large, but also how it has a distinct culture of its own. Furthermore, they argue that meaning helps us understand and interpret the world by bridging the material and symbolic world. Du Gay et al. (1997) argue that the Walkman is cultural because it is seen as a meaningful object, and that it is connected to a distinct set of social practices. Moreover, the Walkman is seen as cultural

because it is clearly associated with certain types of people, places and that it has its own social identity (Du Gay et al. 1997).

Du Gay et al. (1997) further emphasize the importance of language in the creation of meaning. Meaning is given to things by the way they are represented, which is generally through language. When discussing language, Du Gay et al. (1997) refer to any system of representation, such as writing, photography, drawing, painting et cetera, i.e the signs used to represent certain things and their meaning. Another way that Du Gay et al. (1997) argue meaning is created is through comparison, weighing what the artifact is similar versus different to. This allows people to map the meaning of the artifact in relation to other objects, meaning that their meaning is relational. Furthermore, Du Gay et al. (1997) discuss the social practices associated with cultural artifacts. How these artifacts are used in certain ways, giving it meaning and value. They emphasize how the physical aspects of these objects are not what makes them culturally significant, but rather the meaning that is given to them through these cultural practices, which they refer to as signifying practices (Du Gay et al. 1997).

3.2.1 Representation

Representation regards how the cultural artifact is represented, both visually and verbally. Objects do not possess any intrinsic meaning, argue Du Gay et al. (1997), but rather this meaning is created through its representation. It looks at how signs and language creates meaning for the object. This is done both through how the object is marketed through language and imagery, in order to appeal to and create meaning for certain audiences. The authors emphasize how few purchases are rational and instrumental, highlighting how consumer decisions frequently are shaped by influences, even when the consumer may not consciously recognize them. Meaning-associations created through advertising about a product are such an influence that aim to create identification for the consumer (Du Gay et al. 1997). Here, yet again, comparison to other objects is vital in the creation of meaning.

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) adds insight to representation, positing that the postmodern consumer lives in a world filled with symbols and spectacles, where meanings are constructed and communicated through visual, auditory, and experiential channels. They describe the conditions of postmodern consumption as characterized by hyperreality, fragmentation, and a reversal of the traditional roles of production and consumption. Hyperreality blurs the lines between reality and simulation, making it difficult for consumers

to distinguish between the two, while fragmentation reflects the diverse and numerous identities of consumers, who engage with a mix of eclectic and hybridized cultural expressions (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

3.2.2 Identity

Du Gay et al. (1997) describe identity in the Circuit of Culture as about how the artifact is used to create a certain identity for those associated with them, imbuing the artifact with socio-cultural significance. This concept highlights how cultural artifacts are integral to identity formation among consumers. Individuals choose and use these artifacts to mirror or construct a desired self-image, essentially using them as tools to express and shape their identities according to the kind of person they aspire to be. This process illustrates the deep interconnection between consumer choices and personal identity within the framework of contemporary culture (Du Gay et al. 1997).

Furthermore, Du Gay et al. (1997) draw a close connection between culture and media, emphasizing how media has a pivotal role in the production, circulation, use and appropriation of modern culture. The emergence of new media technologies require a set of knowledge and certain practices to be able to use them, something the authors refer to as a social technology. New technologies both reproduce existing cultures, as well as produce new cultures (Du Gay et al. 1997). A similar discussion is held by Jenkins and Denegri-Knott (2017), who argue that digital devices have become increasingly integrated into the shopping experience, to the extent that they become extensions of consumers' minds, enhancing their knowledge, imagination and memory, and consequently changing consumption practices. However, they also emphasize that in order to navigate these digital environments effectively, consumers need to have specific knowledge and skills.

Belk's seminal work on the extended self (1988; 2013) provides an understanding of the complicated relationship between possessions and identity formation. Central to this theory is that individuals perceive their possessions as integral components of their self-concept, rather than only external objects. Moreover, people form psychological attachments to their belongings, which serve as symbolic representations and extensions of their identity (Belk, 1988). Through possessions such as clothing, trophies, or tools, individuals construct and convey aspects of themselves to themselves and others (Belk, 1988). Furthermore, Belk (1988; 2013) suggests that people derive enhanced self-esteem through the conspicuous consumption of those within their social circles.

In the context of dupe culture, where individuals seek to imitate the consumption patterns of influencers or celebrities through the purchase of affordable imitations, Belk's (1988) theory offers insights into how these dupe products become individuals' extended selves. By exploring the symbolic attributes of dupes within the framework of the extended self and identity, researchers can examine the ways in which social media-mediated consumption practices contribute to the construction of digital identities and self-representations. Understanding consumer practices requires examining the relationship between possessions and self-identity, a fundamental concept explored by Belk's (1988; 2013) theory about Possessions and the Extended Self.

Belk (1988) further presents Sartre's (1943) argument that individuals seek, express, and confirm their sense of being through their possessions. Possessions, therefore, serve as tangible markers of identity, allowing individuals to define themselves through their material belongings (Belk, 1988). Additionally, the concept of the extended self surrounds the functions possessions serve in individuals' lives. Furthermore, Belk (1988) claims that possessions contribute to individuals' capabilities for doing and being, enabling them to express, confirm, and ascertain their sense of self. Moreover, shifts in self-identity across the lifespan highlight the nature of the relationship between individuals and their possessions (Belk, 1988).

While extending the self into material possessions has been associated with both positive and negative outcomes, research highlights the potential positive contributions of possessions to one's identity (Belk, 1988). Consumption plays a central role in contemporary society and the concept of the extended self offers a theory for a deeper understanding of the role of consumer practices in shaping identity and meaning in life (Belk, 1988).

The appearance of digital technologies has revolutionized consumer practices, in an era where the boundaries between the self and digital possessions blur (Belk, 2013). In the earlier research of Belk (1988), the concept of the extended self laid the groundwork for understanding the intricate relationship between individuals and their possessions. However, as individuals navigate the digital age, it becomes crucial to revisit and update this conceptualization to reflect the transformations brought about by digitalization (Belk, 2013). In Belk’s (2013) updated conceptualization of the extended self, Belk (2013) delves into the implications of the digital era on individuals' self-identity and the extension of self through possessions. Belk (2013) acknowledges the developing landscape of consumer culture,

illustrated by a shift towards digital consumption practices and the emergence of technologies. Belk (2013) highlights several key shifts in light of digitalization. First, dematerialization challenges the idea of physical possessions as the sole objects of attachment, as individuals increasingly form emotional bonds with digital artifacts such as avatars and online personas (Belk, 2013). Further, the re-embodiment of the self in the digital sphere reshapes how individuals perceive and interact with their possessions, blurring the distinction between physical and digital realms (Belk, 2013).

Furthermore, Belk (2013) claims that the digital age fosters a culture of sharing and co-construction of self, where individuals engage in self-disclosure and self-presentation in online spaces. The proliferation of social media platforms supports the immediate feedback stream, where individuals receive validation and affirmation from their online communities (Belk, 2013). This shared nature of the self extends beyond personal boundaries, shaping a collective sense of identity that goes beyond individuality (Belk, 2013). Belk's (1988; 2013) ideas become relevant in understanding how dupes serve as extensions of the self and in turn become cultural artifacts that possess the value they do.

Another aspect regarding identity can be connected to Holt (2002). Central to Holt's (2002) research is the transition from modern to postmodern consumer culture. In this era, individuals focus more on making their own choices when they buy products. Holt (2002) claims that postmodern consumers refrain from traditional ideas of consumer passivity, instead, they view consumption as a way to show their identities and tell their own personal narratives. In this environment, brands become more important for showing self-expression and identity formation (Holt, 2002). Moreover, Holt (2002) argues that consumers choose brands that resonate with their values and personal narratives. Further, this postmodernism highlights the important shift in consumer attitudes towards branding, where authenticity and relevance replace traditional ideas of brand loyalty and corporate paternalism (Holt, 2002).

Holt's (2002) ideas are related to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), who discuss how the rise of consumer society within modernity created the modern consumer, whose identity is constructed through media, marketing, and the consumption of goods and services. However, the appearance of postmodernity in a new era of consumption characterized by hyperreality, fragmentation, and the blurring of boundaries between production and consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Postmodern consumption marks a change from the hierarchical distinctions

between high and popular culture, emphasizing the symbolic and expressive dimensions of consumer practices (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Moreover, Holt (2002) highlights how the postmodern branding paradigm changed within contemporary consumer cultures. Brands are expected to feel authentic and give individuals a way to express themselves, instead of being perceived as just interested in selling. In this context, consumers reject branding efforts perceived as non-authentic and move towards brands that align with their values and personal narratives (Holt, 2002). Furthermore, Holt (2002) claims that postmodern consumers engage in communal forms of brand connection, forming communities around shared brand identities and values. Additionally, this social postmodernism highlights the growing importance of brands as cultural symbols for shaping group identities within contemporary consumer cultures (Holt, 2002).

Additionally, Holt (2002) presents different contradictions to consumer culture and one of them is *"Sovereignty Inflation,"* which highlights the increased symbolic effort consumers put into using brands to feel in control of their own lives. Constantly trying to express unique identities through what they buy leads to feeling tired of consuming and overwhelmed by all the symbols (Holt, 2002). Holt (2002) claims that this contradiction shows how what companies want from consumers and what consumers actually experience do not always match up, questioning ideas about how much control consumers really have and how engaged they are with brands.

3.2.3 Production

In the Circuit of Culture, production refers to the distinctive practices and processes that are behind the creation of the artifact (Du Gay et al. 1997). It outlines how the creators of these cultural products encode them with certain meaning, which touches upon the values, beliefs and workings behind the creation of the object. If the object is created by a company, it can be about the company culture, storytelling, its origin and individuals within the organization. It regards the narrative that is told about the object and company (Du Gay et al. 1997).

As consumers become more aware of how branding works and start thinking about what they buy, they push for changes in consumer culture, challenging brands and the corporations behind them (Holt, 2002). Holt (2002) claims that by questioning the expressing themselves creatively, consumers can challenge the power of marketers, leading to more fragmentation and contestation within consumer cultures. Moreover, within his framework, consumers are

portrayed as active agents engaged in the construction of their cultural identities, often through acts of resistance against market dictates (Holt, 2002). The proliferation of various forms of consumption indicates a growing consumer consciousness, challenging traditional branding paradigms and engendering an era of consumer-driven innovation and experimentation (Holt, 2002). Holt (2002) argues that this dialectical tension between brands and consumers highlights the constant back and forth where both sides negotiate and argue about what's normal, brand-driven or consumer-driven. Additionally, it shows that consumer culture is always changing, with cultural rules being reshaped as markets change (Holt, 2002).

Moreover, one of Holts (2002) contradictions to consumer culture is known as *"Authenticity Extinction*", which explores the challenge of maintaining genuine authenticity in contemporary branding practices (Holt, 2002). Holt (2002) argues that while brands and advertisers try to appear genuine by borrowing from authentic cultural sources, they actually end up decreasing the authenticity of those cultural elements. Additionally, one of the contradictions presented by Holt (2002) is *"Peeling Away the Brand Veneer"*, which examines the battle between marketers and the anti-branding movement regarding what authenticity really means (Holt, 2002). He claims that while brands present themselves as authentic cultural resources, consumers are increasingly asking for openness and responsibility from corporations (Holt, 2002).

Additionally, Holt (2002) the contradiction "*The Sponsored Society*", which emphasizes how hidden branding efforts have become more common to avoid making consumers feel like they are being forced into buying. However, as more companies use these sneaky tactics, people are paying more attention and becoming more critical of them (Holt, 2002). This is relevant for representation, as it covers the tactics used by brands to market and represent the products, important aspects of representation for Du Gay et al. (1997).

3.2.4 Consumption

The process of production is guided with a certain imagined consumer in mind, which introduces us to the concept of consumption in the *'circuit'*. This mainly refers to how the artifact is used and the significance it is given through its usage. Many seminal scholars within consumption are part of the Frankfurt School, arguing that the rise of commodity production creates a homogenized mass culture, where consumption and purchase are inauthentic, passive and without real value. The authors refer to Walter Benjamin's (1970)

essay, *"The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction"*, a seminal text within cultural studies. Benjamin (1970) discusses the consequences of mass production on art, mentioning a loss of uniqueness and authenticity, and a shattering of tradition and permanence.

Another influential figure discussed by Du Gay et al. (1997) regarding consumption is Jean Baudrillard (1998). Baudrillard (1988) disagrees with notions portraying the consumer as completely passive and a helpless pawn in the hands of producers, and posits that meaning is not inherent to the object, but rather is created through how it is used. He argues that the need consumers have is not for specific objects, but rather is a need for difference and social meaning. Therefore, Baudrillard (1988) argues that consumers' needs can never be fully satisfied. Furthermore, he argues that material culture primarily has identity value, rather than a value based on its use or exchange (Baudrillard, 1988). He explains how consumption functions like a language, communicating as a social marker and identity creator for consumers.

Du Gay et al. (1997) examine the cycle of commodification and appropriation as a dynamic dialogue between production and consumption. Commodification involves producers creating new products or reimagining existing ones in response to consumer practices. Appropriation, on the other hand, is the act of consumers attributing meaning to these products, sometimes diverging from the intended meaning, thus prompting adjustments in production strategies (Du Gay et al. 1997).

Furthermore, Holt's (2002) article has relevance in relation to consumption in the Circuit of Culture. Central to Holt's (2002) discussion about the complex relationship between consumer culture and branding in the contemporary market is the conceptualization of consumer culture as the main principle of consumption. His conceptual framework highlights the symbiotic interaction between market and cultural frameworks. In contemporary society, brands find themselves being challenged by an emergent countercultural movement, questioning the very foundation upon which consumer culture rests (Holt, 2002). Furthermore, Holt (2002) claims that this movement moves within postmodern consumer culture, described by an overall seeking of personal sovereignty through brand engagement. Additionally, Holt (2002) refers to Lasn's (2000) calls for symbolic action, representing a growing global movement against what some see as the harmful impact of branding by big multinational companies on society. Critique of consumer revolutions challenges common beliefs about how much power consumers have within postmodern consumer cultures

according to Holt (2002). Despite the perception of consumer liberation and empowerment, Holt (2002) resists that consumers often reinforce the existing market and maintain the manipulation of personal domination.

Moreover, Holt (2002) presents Firat and Venkatesh (1995) framework of liberatory postmodernism as an important lens through which to examine consumer resistance within contemporary consumer cultures. This theory suggests that small acts of resistance by consumers can be empowering (Holt, 2002). Furthermore, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue that the reversal of production and consumption challenges traditional ideas of value creation, as consumers actively participate in the creation and circulation of meanings and values within the consumer society. Moreover, they describe how the postmodern consumer represents a change in consumer practices and identity formation in response to the cultural and economic transformations of the postmodern era.

Furthermore, taste and social distinction are important aspects of consumption and culture. Pierre Bourdieu (1979) developed the theory of taste and social distinction as part of his broader examination of social class and cultural capital. While Bourdieu (1979) is more positioned in the field of sociology, his theory has provided a valuable lens through which to examine how consumers navigate and negotiate meaning within a cultural landscape shaped by social structures and power dynamics. Bourdieu (1979) argues that taste is not merely a matter of personal preference but is deeply influenced by social structures and cultural capital. Furthermore, his theory is mentioned in the original Circuit of Culture theory (Du Gay et al. 1997), further indicating its relevance for the study. Additionally, within the realm of dupe culture, Bourdieu's (1979) theory offers insights into how taste and distinction influence consumer practices and choices. By examining the practices of dupe consumption through Bourdieu's (1979) theory, researchers can determine the symbolic meanings and social hierarchies embedded within these consumption practices, highlighting the ways in which digital consumer cultures reflect and reproduce broader patterns of social distinction and cultural capital.

According to Bourdieu (1979), people's tastes in food, art, music, fashion, and other cultural fields are shaped by their social backgrounds, education, and economic status. He claims that individuals use taste as a way to signal their social position and distinguish themselves from others. Bourdieu (1979) introduces the concept of habitus, which refers to the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their socialization within a

particular social class. Habitus shapes people's tastes and preferences, leading them to value certain cultural practices and forms over others (Bourdieu, 1979).

Furthermore, Bourdieu (1979) introduces the idea of cultural capital, which surrounds the cultural knowledge, skills, and resources that individuals possess. Those with higher cultural capital are better equipped to appreciate and engage with *"high culture*" forms, such as classical music or literature, which are often associated with elite social groups (Bourdieu, 1979). Through his theory of taste and social distinction, Bourdieu (1979) highlights how cultural consumption serves as a form of social stratification, with different tastes reinforcing existing inequalities. He further argues that taste operates as a mechanism of social distinction, allowing individuals to position themselves within the social hierarchy and maintain their status (Bourdieu, 1979). It takes a certain cultural competence to be able to decipher and consume objects of high cultural value (Bourdieu, 1979).

Overall, Bourdieu's (1979) theory of taste and social distinction emphasizes the ways in which cultural practices and preferences are shaped by social structures and serve to reproduce social inequality. Critics of Bourdieu emphasize how taste does not necessarily result in social stratification, unless certain tastes are recognized as superior across classes and is defended by these elite social groups (Lamont, 1992). Holt (1997) argues in favor of Bourdieu, emphasizing how habitus and taste occur as practical knowledge rather than discursive. The exclusionary nature of taste is not an intended consequence, but rather created through the rational cultivation of taste that occurs within one's social class (Holt, 1997). Furthermore, Holt (1997) highlights Bourdieu's arguments regarding the binary opposition of taste and social class, where lower classes may see culture favored by the cultural elite as pretentious, and the opposite being true. This binary further reproduces the social standings of taste (Holt, 1997).

Another aspect that Holt (1997) discusses is the technological advancements leading to wider accessibility of goods in society, very relevant to the aspect of consumption. Styles created for higher class quickly are produced and diffused among mass markets. Holt (1997) refers to different postmodern theorists, such as Baudrillard, Lyotard and Jameson, and their arguments that advanced capitalist societies massively overproduce commodity-signs, making it more difficult for such signs to signal status. The popularization of elite objects has led to a weakened hierarchy of objectified cultural capital, meaning that cultural capital loses efficacy (Holt, 1997). While there has been a blurring in cultural hierarchies, cultural capital

still has a social classificatory power, argues Holt (1997), although emphasizing that these objects no longer constitute accurate symbols of social class. The popularization of elite objects means that class differences are no longer as visible through objectified capital, leading to more importance being regarded to embodied capital, means Holt (1997). He further argues that this has led to different consumption practices to express distinction, meaning that elites must consume the same categories, yet in a distinguished and inaccessible manner as compared to those of lower class (Holt, 1997). The consumption practices themselves must set the cultural elites apart (Holt, 1997).

3.2.5 Regulation

The component regulation in the circuit relates to control functions, ranging from formal controls such as laws, protocols and policies to more informal controls such as norms and expectations. These regulations create meaning through governing whether the artifact is acceptable or correct in its context. Du Gay et al. (1997) discuss regulation mainly in regards to the Walkman and its effects on the public versus private spheres, as the Walkman allowed for listening to music privately in a public setting. The Walkman was revolutionary in blurring the conventional boundaries of a previously private act, listening to music, and its occurrence in public space. This created a public debate and 'moral panic' regarding the appropriateness and safety of such practice. It was a threat to the current order of conduct, leading to resistance (Du Gay et al. 1997).

4. Methodology

This chapter details the methodological choices of the thesis, explaining the selection of a qualitative methodology and an abductive approach. It then describes the use of semi-structured interviews for empirical material, elaborates on the sampling strategy, and outlines the methods for empirical analysis. Additionally, the chapter addresses ethical considerations and potential limitations, providing a critical reflection on the research quality.

4.1 Research Strategy

This study seeks to explore an emerging digital consumer culture, focusing on dupe culture. The aim of the thesis is thus to deeply understand consumers' personal experiences and perceptions of this culture and the artifacts associated with it. Given the subjective and interpretive nature of this aim, a qualitative methodology has been selected as the most suitable approach. This choice aligns with the perspectives of Bell, Bryman and Harley

(2022), who advocate for qualitative methods when exploring how individuals subjectively interpret their social environments, emphasizing depth of understanding over quantitative analysis. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study acknowledges the importance of cultural nuances and meanings in shaping consumers' experiences and perceptions of dupe culture. Qualitative methods enable researchers to explore the underlying meanings, values, and symbolic representations within consumer culture (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), appropriate for highlighting the interactions between individuals, society, and consumer artifacts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, qualitative research is often defined by its use of text as empirical material, as opposed to numbers which follows a quantitative approach (Flick, 2018).

This study has a cultural perspective, and is closely situated near the field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The main interest for this thesis is to understand the meaning and value surrounding the construction of dupe culture for its participants. The qualitative approach is well-suited for exploring a cultural perspective. Cultural phenomena are complex and context-dependent, requiring a deep and nuanced understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which they occur (Silverman, 2022). Qualitative methods offer the flexibility and depth needed to capture the richness and difficulty of these phenomena, allowing researchers to delve into the subjective experiences and explanations of individuals within the cultural context.

Through in-depth interviews and analysis, this study seeks to explore the cultural dynamics and symbolic meanings that underpin dupe culture, providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of its participants. Thus, the qualitative approach not only aligns with the interpretive nature of the research aim but also offers a methodological framework that is well-suited for capturing the cultural complexities inherent in the study of consumer practices and culture.

4.2 Research Approach

As the aim of this thesis is to gain understanding for an emergent consumer culture, the choice was made to use the Circuit of Culture by Du Gay et al. (1997) as a foundation for our study. An abductive approach was deemed most appropriate in line with this aim and considering the stance taken regarding theory. An abductive reasoning is defined by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) as a "*reasoning where we connect an observation or instance to a theory by means of plausible interpretation*" (p. 267). Bryman and Bell (2017) state that the

abductive approach is a perspective on the relationship between theory and research practice that is related to an inductive approach, where descriptions of social reality are grounded in people's experiences and interpretations of this reality. Moreover, instead of observing facts or drawing conclusions from previous theories, the abductive approach allows the researcher to draw conclusions about possible causes or explanations for the observed phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2017). An abductive reasoning allows for flexibility in integrating theory with empirical observations which is particularly useful in exploring new or emergent phenomena (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), as is relevant for this thesis.

Bell et al. (2022) bring up how the involvement of theory in the qualitative research process has been widely debated, with theory often seen as what should be the outcome of a study, rather than preceding it and shaping the design. Silverman (2022), however, argues that theory rather must be integrated into the research design from the start. By utilizing the Circuit of Culture by Du Gay et al. (1997), we had guidance for the empirical material collection and analysis, allowing for an interplay between the established theory and the exploration of this new culture.

4.2 Collection of Empirical Material

To deeply explore the construction of the consumer culture around dupes, we employed semi-structured qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are suitable for studies that examine people's perceptions, experiences, and attitudes about a phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This method was specifically chosen to capture the nuanced perspectives of individuals actively engaged in this culture, providing invaluable insights into how they interpret and contribute to its formation. Bell et al. (2022) argue that qualitative interviews enable researchers to gather rich and detailed material directly from the source. As we take a cultural consumer perspective, the insights from consumers that are part of the culture at hand and how they perceive its construction was deemed as the most valuable. Additionally, Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) emphasize the value of using natural language material, such as that gathered through these interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of the social realities perceived by participants.

4.2.1 Selection of interview participants

To be able to gain insight into consumer perspectives of dupe products, a purposive sampling method was used to select participants for the collection of the empirical material. Flick (2018) argues that qualitative research most often benefits from a more purposive sampling

strategy, providing a representation of the participants' reality, rather than a statistically representative one, as often preferred in quantitative research. A purposive sampling design allows for precision and depth (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In order to select participants that had experience relevant to create a theoretical understanding of the subject, we used criterion sampling to select participants based on relevant experience (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), focusing on age, gender, and awareness of dupe products. These criteria were specifically chosen to collect material that is both rich and aligned with the study's objectives, allowing us to best answer the research questions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Boyle & Schmierbach, 2024).

Although diverse age groups purchase dupes, our focus was strategically narrowed down to Generation Z. As previously mentioned, Gen Z have been found to be the generation most actively purchasing dupe products (Briggs, 2023). By narrowing our focus to one specific generation, we can closely examine the phenomenon through the lens of Gen Z's perspective. This approach allows us to maintain clarity and depth in our analysis without the need to delve into the potential influence of age in the context, which falls outside the scope of this study. Generational terms and years are often subject to debate, however, for the purposes of this study, the definition from Pew Research Center was adopted, covering individuals born from 1997 to 2012 (Dimock, 2019). However, to adhere to ethical standards and ensure all participants are legal adults, our sample is restricted to individuals aged 18 to 27 years. This age range ensures that all participants can provide informed consent and fully engage in the research process without ethical concerns.

All participants were women. This choice was made as much of the online discussion surrounding dupes emphasizes that it's a form of culture mainly practiced by women (Burlinghaus, 2024; Payne, 2023). Interviewing only women provides a quite homogeneous sample, potentially reducing variability due to potential gender differences in perception and practices related to dupes. On the other hand, this methodological choice enhances the study's capacity to collect rich qualitative material that might have been diluted in a mixed-gender sample.

The final criteria mentioned, dupe product awareness, meant that participants have intentionally purchased such a product at some point. This criterion was chosen to ensure that the participants had experience with the culture, and that they had first-hand experience in purchasing them, so that they could provide their subjective, rich experience of the culture.

The emphasis on intentional purchase addresses the concern that some consumers may purchase dupe products unknowingly, which could skew the depth and relevance of the insights regarding their engagement with dupe culture.

In order to find the participants for the study, snowball sampling was used in combination with the criterion sampling. This was done as the thesis is studying a consumer culture that does not have any direct sampling frame at hand, hence making any type of probability sampling difficult and also not in line with the qualitative aim and nature of the study. As this study aims for rich and deep insight into subjective experiences, generalizability was not an objective. Snowball sampling is useful when studying groups and for samples where it is difficult to identify individuals as part of the population (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2024; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Through social media, an initial set of participants were found that fulfilled the criteria. Later, these participants were asked if they could refer to someone from their social network that could potentially partake in the study.

Table 1. Interview Participants

	Pseudo name	**Gender**	**Age**
1	Sabrina	Female	18 years
2	Astrid	Female	21 years
3	Sally	Female	22 years
4	Klara	Female	22 years
5	Mia	Female	23 years
6	Rosalia	Female	23 years
7	Siri	Female	24 years
8	Paulina	Female	25 years
9	Alva	Female	27 years

4.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

A flexible and semi-structured approach was undertaken for the interviews, allowing adaptation and development of the questions covered during the empirical material collection process. This approach allows for flexibility, giving room for the interviewee to expand upon the ideas brought up while also providing some preparation for what is covered (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2024). Bell et al. (2022) argue that semi-structured interviews are preferable

when more than a single researcher is conducting the interviews, as were the case for this study.

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix X) was created to serve as a supportive framework during the interviews, providing structure and guidance while also allowing for follow-up questions, as Bell et al. (2022) argue is valuable for creating richer and more comprehensive empirical material. This argument is further supported by Easterby-Smith et al (2021) who claim that exploratory studies typically require a lower degree of structuring. However, there is a concern that the use of an interview guide might restrict the conversation, potentially limiting participants from freely discussing their thoughts and experiences related to the topic (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). To address this issue, the interview guide was designed to include open-ended questions that were carefully aligned with the research objectives (Charmaz, 2014). The guide was designed to encourage participants to express their views fully and explore the subject matter in depth, facilitating a more comprehensive and uninhibited dialogue.

Before the interviews, we familiarized ourselves with the culture theoretical approach described in section 3. This aligned with our abductive approach, laying a theoretical groundwork for the empirical material collection process while still allowing for the emergence of new themes in the material. This approach not only enhanced the comprehensiveness of the research but also supported the iterative development of theory that is central to abductive reasoning (Bell et al. 2022).

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the study with a consent form (see Appendix Y), which allowed them to provide informed consent before their participation. In the form, they were provided with information about the purpose of the study and what would be expected from them as participants. Furthermore, they were informed that the interviews would be audio recorded to allow for transcription as well as the protection of their data and integrity. All names in the study were changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees, as well as ensuring that they felt comfortable being fully transparent in their interviews.

The interviews were conducted in person, in order to take advantage of the positive aspects of being able to capture non-verbal communication and cues (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The interviews started out with an introduction of the subject and aim of the study. The participants were given a reminder of their right to opt-out at any given moment considering

the voluntary nature of the study, as well as that the interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed. The initial questions covered basic demographic information such as age and occupation then delved more into their experience of buying dupes and dupe culture. The interview guide incrementally reached more difficult and abstract questions, allowing the interviewee to become more comfortable in the interview setting before those types of questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

During the interviews, a designated interviewer guided the conversation using the interview guide as a reference. At the same time, the other researcher was responsible for taking notes and staying attentive to potential follow-up questions, aiming to enrich the empirical material, in accordance with recommendations by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). To encourage participants to share more openly and lead the conversation, the moderator employed both laddering-up and laddering-down techniques (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). By prompting participants with 'why' questions, the laddering-up technique helped explore the underlying reasons behind their responses. Conversely, the laddering-down technique involved requesting specific examples to clarify their experiences. Additionally, the moderator delved deeper into participants' feelings and emotions and rephrased their responses to ensure accuracy and validation of the information (Charmaz, 2014).

In total, nine (9) interviews were conducted, lasting approximately 40-60 minutes. We did not have an initial set number of interviews we wanted to conduct, instead aiming for theoretical saturation. After this number of interviews had been conducted, the new material was no longer providing any major new theoretical insights, suggesting that sufficient theoretical saturation had been reached (Bell et al. 2022). This number of interviews was deemed enough for saturation while also allowing for deep analysis of the collected material, as suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007).

4.3 Method of Analysis

For this thesis, a thematic method was used to analyze the empirical material in order to explore the construction of dupe culture. As previously mentioned, the interviews were transcribed. By transcribing the collected material, a more manageable and comprehensible analysis of the content is facilitated (Berger, 2016). The initial phase of analysis began during transcription, allowing for early familiarization with the material. Multiple readings of the finalized transcripts helped deepen understanding of the material before formal analysis commenced (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

For the analysis process, we followed the methodological steps outlined by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), which includes *sorting*, *reducing*, and *arguing* the material. Qualitative research typically generates extensive and complex sets of material, thus, the first step is sorting the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). During the initial sorting phase, we organized the material thematically according to the Circuit of Culture and its five elements (Du Gay et al. 1997). During the sorting process, we also identified sub themes such as *Information, Social Media,* and *Distrust in Brands*. Google Sheets was utilized to manage and visualize the material and themes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Coding Scheme

Category	**Subtheme**	**Quote**	**Explanation**
Consumption			
Representation			
Identity			
Regulation			
Production			

After organizing the empirical material, the next step was reduction of the material to become more manageable (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This reduction process was designed to highlight and focus on the sub themes that were most compelling and representative of the material, ensuring they were particularly relevant for supporting the analysis needed to address the research question of the thesis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This reduction allowed for deeper analysis of the themes regarded as more meaningful and rich in order for understanding the dupe culture.

The final stage of our analysis involved critically evaluating and theorizing about our empirical findings. This step was crucial for establishing the significance of our research (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We consistently sought to align our findings with, or differentiate them from, existing theories brought up in the theoretical framework or literature review to support our conclusions. Through this analytical approach, we challenged and expanded upon established knowledge, thereby offering new insights to the field and underscoring our study's contribution to academic research (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Furthermore, Spiggle's (1994) guidelines for qualitative analysis and interpretation have been kept in mind. We have separated the acts of analysis versus interpretation of the material. Spiggle (1994) describes interpretation as similar to deciphering a code, representing a form of translation of meaning. This perspective is valuable in consumer research, where scholars aim to understand the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, how these meanings form patterns, and how cultural symbols and codes affirm and reproduce cultural themes (Spiggle, 1994). The act of interpretation is subjective, as all investigators have different experiences for translating and understanding the meaning others attribute to their text (Spiggle, 1994).

4.5 Methodological Considerations

Often when assessing the quality of quantitative research, the criteria of validity, reliability and generalizability are used. Bell et al. (2022) argue that these concepts should not be directly applied in their quantitative sense to qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985; 1994) propose two alternative criteria, namely trustworthiness and authenticity, as more suited for evaluating qualitative research. The criteria of trustworthiness is made up of four subcriteria - *credibility, transferability, dependability* and *confirmability.*

Credibility relates to the believability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve this, one can continuously involve the participants in the research process, ensuring that the research truthfully reflects their experience and intentions (Cope, 2014). The quotes used in the study were sent to all the participants for them to validate that our interpretations reflected their meaning.

Transferability concerns whether the findings can be applied to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As we argued, there is a lack of existing research within the construction of digital consumer cultures. Our exploration of a specific consumer culture cannot be explicitly applied to other contexts, while it can provide rich insight into how the phenomenon may manifest. The aim for this study is exploratory, wishing to gain deep insights and understanding for a consumer culture. Hence, transferability is not the goal of the research.

Dependability assesses whether the findings of the study would be consistent if replicated with similar conditions (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). To enhance the study's dependability, we have documented the research and analysis process in a thorough and detailed way, enabling

for the replication of the study. Additionally, the analysis and discussion section is enriched with detailed quotes from the interviewees to illustrate each theme clearly.

Confirmability assesses the extent to which the study's findings are the result of the experiences and perspectives of the participants rather than the researcher's biases or involvement. To counter potential researcher bias, this study has been conducted with a strong commitment to reflexivity, consistently reflecting on our role as researchers within the qualitative research process (Alvesson, 2003; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). We have made an effort to set aside any pre-existing ideas or biases about the phenomenon under study, striving to understand it solely through the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees. We carefully considered elements like the formulation of interview questions and the power dynamics during interviews to minimize our influence on participant responses. Other measures taken to minimize potential subjectivity is the constant revisitation to the empirical material, and by having an iterative analysis process, allowing material to be examined both individually and collaboratively. Great emphasis was placed on intercoder reliability. By collaboratively developing the coding scheme and having ongoing dialogue about the coding process, good conditions for reliable coding were created, as argued by Boyle and Schmierbach (2024). During this phase, we analyzed the material both independently and as a team, engaging in detailed discussions to build a thorough understanding of the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

In 1994, Guba and Lincoln added the final criterion - *authenticity,* referring to how faithfully the study expresses the true feelings and emotions of the participant and their experience. This criterion encompasses various aspects that guided the research process to ensure the highest level of quality. Fairness regards to how the different viewpoints in the study are represented (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This was aimed for by providing quotes and viewpoints from all interviewees in the study, aiming to give them all a similar amount of space in the analysis.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Boyle and Schmierbach (2024) argue that the main reason for conducting research for the good of society, thus ethical considerations are of immense value. These considerations are important in interview research to protect the rights and comfort of the participants involved (Flick, 2018). As mentioned in section 4.2.2, all interviewees gave informed consent through a consent form prior to their participation. They were informed about their right to share

thoughts without any pressure, ensuring that their voices are heard willingly and respected, as well as that their participation is entirely voluntary, points emphasized as important by Boyle and Schmierbach (2024).

Moreover, efforts have been made to mitigate potential power imbalances between researchers and interviewees that could influence the outcome of the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). There is no guarantee that the responses provided are entirely truthful, as these power asymmetries may influence the respondents to answer in a manner they believe the interviewer wants to hear. To reduce this potential power asymmetry, great emphasis has been placed on being clear about the purpose of the study, being observant, and providing a relaxed environment while ensuring the context of the interview is clear. To ensure that the interviewees feel comfortable speaking openly and in respect for their privacy, they are kept anonymous and reminded of the voluntary nature of the interview.

5. Empirical Analysis

In this section, we will present and analyze the collected empirical material through the theoretical approach introduced in section 3. The presentation and analysis of the material is organized around the core elements of the Circuit of Culture by Du Gay et al (1997), namely *consumption, representation, identity, regulation,* and *production*. While we address each component individually, it's essential to acknowledge their interconnectedness and interdependence. Some themes span across multiple elements, despite being predominantly discussed within a single one. Therefore, we delve into each element extensively, drawing upon complementary perspectives from other cultural viewpoints outlined in the theoretical approach.

5.1 Consuming Dupes

This section delves into the consumption of dupes, examining how the participants navigate the process of purchasing dupes and how dupes have changed their consumption habits.

5.1.1 Social Media Guiding the Consumption Process

Throughout the interviews, the participants explained their process of dupe consumption. It became evident that the journey toward purchasing a dupe begins well before any actual purchase occurs. In accordance with the idea that the dupe culture is a digital consumer culture, social media was unanimously mentioned as the primary discovery channel for

dupes, serving as a platform for both general awareness and specific product recommendations.

> I found out about dupes through people who are recommending them on social media. I bought a perfume from Zara that was a dupe of Paco Rabanne's 'Fame' perfume. First, I saw a TikTok that Zara had a dupe of that perfume, which I love, so I bought it. I can barely tell the difference. - *Sabrina*

The important role of social media in shaping consumer decisions, is evident here, where the platform not only informs but also inspires purchase decisions. The discovery feed on respective social media seems to be the main point of discovery for the participants, as illustrated by Astrid who states, *"I would say it mainly comes in my feed actually. I rarely search myself".* While other participants agree on the importance of the 'feed' in discovering dupes, Astrid's statement that she rarely searches for them herself is in contrast to Rosalia, Paulina, Sally and Klara, who all state that they use the search engine Google to actively search for dupes for specific high-end products. For example, Sally states that *"I find dupes on TikTok and Google. Often a dupe pops up in my feed, but I'll search on Google if there's something specific I want".* This proactive approach indicates a dynamic where consumers are not merely passive recipients of information but are actively shaping their consumption patterns through targeted searches, in alignment with Baudrillard's (1988) arguments. It also indicates that digital devices act as an extension of consumers' minds, becoming more integrated with the consumption experience (Jenkins & Denegri-Knott, 2017).

If these participants were interested in an expensive product, they would often search for available dupes before making a purchase.

> I always check TikTok. There, I search for the product and "review" or the product and "dupe." Then, I also Google the product. Usually, it's trending products that are being discussed, which I'm excited to try, and there are often articles online titled "Do you want a dupe for this," so there's usually a lot of that. - *Rosalia*

Rosalia goes on to explain that *"I'll choose the dupe unless there is trade-off in quality for the cheaper price".* This double crossing of information and reading reviews is prevalent throughout most interviews, indicating that quality is highly valued in dupe consumption, as stated in the definition proposed in the previous section of the analysis. Rosalia's unwillingness to trade quality for price further indicates the importance of quality in dupes.

This is in contrast to much of the research on counterfeits, which often highlights a lower quality for such products as opposed to the product they are imitating (Grossman & Shapiro, 1986; Bloch et al. 1993; Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2008), but aligns well with claims of their quality improving (Wilcox et al. 2009). This contrasts with counterfeit research indicating that consumers are willing to trade quality for the "brand" that a counterfeit imitates (Gentry et al. 2001), further distancing dupe consumption from counterfeit consumption.

5.1.2 Meanings Behind Consumption

Several factors influencing the consumption of dupes were identified during the interviews. The primary motivation for purchasing dupes was expressed by the participants as affordability. The participants express a desire to save money while still obtaining products that offer comparable quality to the higher-priced alternatives. Sally made a remark noting, "*It's a cheaper version of a good product. Kind of like a way to test the more expensive product and see if it's good"*. This quote captures the idea of dupes as a form of trial or experimentation before committing to purchasing the original, higher-priced product. Her perspective aligns with the ideas explored by Gentry et al. (2001), positing that consumers use counterfeits as a trial to assess the quality and performance of certain products before making significant investments. By opting for a more affordable alternative, consumers like Sally reduce the financial risks associated with purchasing expensive items without prior knowledge of their effectiveness or suitability.

Furthermore, Astrid highlights:

> It becomes a way for people who are less fortunate, especially now with the high inflation. Things are expensive. Dupes create accessibility for people in financial vulnerability to be able to fit in and to be able to participate in a trend. - *Astrid*

From a theoretical perspective, Astrid's quote can be aligned with Baudrillard's (1988) argument regarding the creation of meaning through consumption. Baudrillard (1988) asserts that consumers seek not only the functionality of products but also the social meaning associated with them. In Astrid's case, the dupe serves as a means of participating in the cultural significance attached to high-end products without fully committing to their high economic cost. By owning the dupe, consumers engage in a process of symbolic

consumption, where the product's value is obtained not only from its utility but also from its ability to signal status and cultural belonging.

Moreover, Mia argued that "*If I buy a dupe over the real thing, it is usually for economic reasons.*" and further adds depth by introducing the idea that factors other than economic considerations can influence dupe purchases.

> I bought a dupe perfume that was a much smaller size than the original and it suited me much better. So say there are other aspects that are more of interest to me, then such things can make me buy it over the original. Like that it's more convenient. - *Mia*

This suggests that convenience can also drive consumers to choose dupes over originals. By referencing Mia's experience, it becomes evident that consumers may prioritize aspects such as suitability, if economic factors are not the sole driving force behind their decisions. This can also be seen as aligning with Bourdieu's (1979) argument that individuals use taste as a way to signal their social position and distinguish themselves from others. For those with limited economic resources, opting for dupes allows them to participate in consumption practices associated with higher social classes without bearing the economic burden of purchasing high-end products.

Moreover, the issue of availability emerges as another significant influencing factor behind dupe consumption.

> I also think because young people are starting even earlier with makeup and skincare and stuff. There are like ten-year-olds walking around wanting Drunk Elephant products, and they can't get their parents to buy them at the original price, so they have to look for dupes. - *Rosalia*

Rosalia's statement indicates the wide range of ages that partake in dupe consumption. In such cases, the availability of dupes becomes essential for consumers who cannot access or afford the original products. Astrid further elaborates on the availability factor, mentioning:

> But in some cases, it might also be about availability, that it's easier to get the dupe since some brands are not sold everywhere. Like Hailey Bieber's Rhode lip gloss, she doesn't sell it in Sweden for example. - *Astrid*

The availability factor highlighted resonates with Holt's (2002) concept of "*Sovereignty Inflation*", where consumers use brands to assert control over their lives. The inability to access certain products due to factors like geographical limitations or affordability challenges consumers' sense of sovereignty. In response, consumers turn to dupes as a means of exerting control and fulfilling their consumption desires.

Lastly, Alva states that:

> Makeup products are used often and I need to buy them more frequently, therefore I cannot justify buying a product for over 1000 kr when I can get the same result from a product from another brand for under 200 kr. - *Alva*

Her quote emphasizes a practical approach to consumption that is driven by cost-effectiveness and the usefulness of the product. Alva's focus on the frequent use of makeup aligns with Baudrillard's (1988) ideas, particularly his argument that consumer needs are never fully satisfied, leading to a continuous cycle of consumption. In the realm of dupes, these products function not only as practical items but also as tools for self-expression and identity construction, highlighting the importance of affordability and accessibility. Additionally, Alva's comments underscore the role of dupes in democratizing access to consumer goods, especially within the beauty industry where luxury brands often come with high price tags. This perspective resonates with Holt's (2002) analysis of postmodern consumer culture, where the appeal of brands is increasingly measured by their alignment with personal values and stories, rather than their exclusivity or cost.

5.1.3 A Culture of Informed Consumption

During the interviews, the participants expressed that they had shifted their consumption habits to include searching for dupes before making a purchase. As shown in previous sections, the participants in the study most often begin searching on digital platforms, particularly on social media where content creators share their experiences and recommendations of dupes. This practice aligns with Baudrillard's (1988) rejection of passive consumer models, suggesting instead that consumers actively partake in consumption. For example, Alva expresses how her consumption habits have shifted towards actively seeking dupes, especially for frequently used products: *"Yes, dupes have changed how I consume, especially considering products that are used often and need to be refilled"*.

This statement illustrates a strategic shift in consumption habits, influenced by the accessibility of evaluating alternatives through digital platforms. This is further shown by Mia, who says "*I would go on Google and search for the product and 'dupe,' 'cheap' or 'an alternative to'".* Through digital platforms, the consumers are given access to information and reviews that allow them to make an informed choice about dupes, arguably acting as extension of the consumers' minds as discussed by Jenkins and Denegri-Knott (2017). This access to information about dupes can be argued to be democratizing the market, which is expressed by Klara:

> It gives consumers better conditions, that the big companies have to keep their prices down so more people can afford it. But it might also lead to overconsumption, so it's... both good and bad things. - *Klara*

Here, Klara emphasizes how dupes allow for consumers to avoid being overcharged for the products they purchase, but also resonates that it might lead to overconsumption. This insight resonates with Holt's (2002) analysis of postmodern consumer culture, where market dynamics are continually reshaped by consumer practices and cultural shifts. Klara's observation can also resonate with Bourdieu's (1979) argument regarding cultural consumption as a form of social stratification. While high-end or luxury manufacturers may initially cater to elite social groups, the availability of dupes and consumers actively seeking alternatives can disrupt this hierarchy, democratizing the market and challenging traditional ideas of status and distinction based on consumption. It seems that the accessibility of information online allows more people to collect cultural capital, without necessarily coming from an elite social group with certain habitus, as Bourdieu (1979) termed it.

Moreover, the majority of participants emphasized the importance of verifying product safety and quality. Sabrina says that *"Before buying a dupe I want to know that it's safe to use, does not contain bad ingredients, if it is like the original and has good quality.".* Another example is Paulina, who describes a time she purchased a makeup product:

> I looked up dupes for a concealer I had, but it was too expensive to repurchase, and found one online. Then, I went to a store, looked at it and tried it on top of my hand to feel the consistency, and so on, to get a feel if it is similar to the one I used to have. It was a good match, so I bought it. - *Paulina*

Paulina's experience further indicates the informed nature of dupe purchases. The interviews suggest that the decision to make duplicate purchases is neither spontaneous nor uninformed, instead, they are the result of deliberate and informed decision-making. This supports Baudrillard's (1988) theory that consumers actively engage in the consumption process. Participants use a variety of sources, varying from TikTok to Google to Reddit, employing a comprehensive approach that extends beyond mere price comparisons. This method of validating purchases aligns with Bourdieu's (1979) concept of cultural capital, which includes the cultural knowledge and resources individuals acquire. The diversity of sources utilized by participants demonstrates their cultural competence in leveraging these platforms to make informed consumption choices. Furthermore, digital media appears to enhance their cultural capital, providing them with additional resources to inform their decisions.

5.2 Representing Dupes

This section will delve into an in-depth exploration of how the interviewees perceive dupe products as represented and the content related to it.

5.2.1 The Representation of Dupes

During the interviews, the participants revealed varied perspectives on how dupes are represented, reflecting the complexities related in the representation of dupes within the Circuit of Culture. This complexity is increased by the absence of a clear, universally accepted definition of the phenomenon, posing several challenges in understanding and explaining dupe culture and how dupes are given meaning. Participants in the study highlighted varying criteria for identifying dupes, some emphasize the visual similarities to the original products, while others focus on functionality as the defining characteristic. Despite these differing perspectives, a consistent theme across the interviews is the vital role of social media in defining and representing products as dupes. Astrid shares an illustrative example;

> I found a perfume dupe on TikTok recently. It was a dupe from Zara, of the Carolina Herrera perfume. The perfume bottle doesn't look anything like the original.. It's a square little bottle, not a stiletto like the original. But the scent is so similar that if I wear Zara's perfume and you have the real one, no one would be able to feel any difference. - *Astrid*

In this case, Astrid is describing how she found a dupe for a perfume through TikTok, even though the perfume does not look like the original or claim to have a similar scent. This example underscores the role of social media in representing dupes, and the consumers' reliance on recommendations from social media and influencers. Astrid notes that Zara does not explicitly market this perfume as a dupe, which further illustrates the complicated nature of how dupes are often communicated, or rather *not* communicated, by the company behind the product itself. Rather, the product is given its status and meaning as a dupe through social media and consumers appropriating these products with this meaning. This aligns well with Du Gay et al. (1997) and their discussion about commodification and appropriation, with the production companies creating new products and the consumers attributing them with their own meaning. In the case of dupes, companies are creating products inspired by other brands, not stating that that is the case, while consumers are giving them that label.

A similar discussion is held by Mia, noting that *"It feels like companies often don't openly admit they're dupes"*. This statement underscores the critical role of word of mouth and social media in shaping the perception of dupes, contrasting sharply with traditional marketing efforts from the manufacturers. It can be argued that a dupe is not a dupe unless it is given that meaning among consumers. This meaning seems to largely be constructed in social media, according to the interviewees. So, social media has an important role in the signifying practice of dupe culture, using Du Gay et als. (1997) terms. Furthermore, it suggests that to fully engage in dupe culture, consumers need access to specific knowledge about which products are considered dupes, knowledge primarily disseminated through social media channels. This can be argued as a form of cultural competence needed in order to partake in dupe culture, in alignment with Bourdieu's (1979) theory. There is a specific cultural capital needed to understand which products are dupes.

As previously mentioned in section 5.1, the interviewees typically discover dupes not only through active searches but primarily through their social media feeds, such as the 'For You' page on TikTok. These algorithms play a significant role in the representation of dupes as they curate the content that informs users' perceptions and understanding of the products, making them pivotal in the cultural representation of dupes. Another aspect in relation to this is the abundance of recommendations available on social media, as exemplified by Siri, who states *"I usually find dupes on TikTok, but from multiple people. I do spend some time watching a lot of people's recommendations for a dupe product. to get a feeling if it is good*

or not". Here, Siri's argument indicates that the volume of recommendations on TikTok helps her determine the quality of a dupe. Similar arguments are carried throughout the interviews, where seeing multiple recommendations strengthen the credibility of the product. Sally explains that she *"[...] wouldn't blindly trust one person if they say something is a good dupe. But if it's a trend that people are posting about something, then it becomes more reliable"*. This is further expressed by Klara, who illustrates that:

> If a dupe works as well as the original, it trends very easily. Then you can see many others who have used it who can vouch for the quality of it. - *Klara*

This indicates that the amount of recommendations on TikTok not only increases visibility. but also gives credibility to the products, turning individual opinions into a shared confirmation of quality. As most interviewees were adamant about quality in their definition of dupes, this also is important for the meaning given to them, making this confirmation of quality more important. This can be argued to align with the Circuit of Culture, where representation is greatly shaped by shared validation and understanding of an artifact's value and meaning (Du Gay et al. 1997). It seems that the dupe culture is centered around its participants discovering dupes and wanting to share them with others, creating the representation for the culture and the products.

5.2.2 Showcasing Dupes on Social Media

The showcasing of dupes on social media was discussed as an important aspect in the construction of the dupe culture. As all interviewees mentioned social media content as influential in relation to their dupe purchases, they were asked to describe the typical content they see showcasing and surrounding dupes. The general idea of the content brought up was described as centered around comparing the dupe to the original product. For example, Rosalia explained how *"It's usually some girl or influencer presenting, 'Do you want this but don't want to spend the money? 'Here's a dupe' "*. Similarly, Sally described how *"they hold up the products next to each other and explain how it's a dupe and do a comparison between them, showing that they do the same thing*". Demonstrations of the product in use, such as side-by-side comparisons of wearing a high-end makeup product versus its dupe, help to visually assert the quality and similar performance of the cheaper item. The prevalence of comparison in the representation of dupes aligns with Du Gay et al. (1997) and their argument that meaning is created through comparison for cultural artifacts. The dupe does not obtain the same value were it not for the relation that has been created through comparison to

another product. The meaning of dupes is seemingly relational to the meaning of the original product.

Dupe content on social media was described as often featuring specific aesthetic choices that make it instantly recognizable and engaging. These posts and videos commonly utilize a vibrant, eye-catching thumbnail or first image, which usually includes the dupe product prominently displayed alongside or compared with the original brand item. The layout is designed to highlight the similarities between the high-end product and its more affordable counterpart, emphasizing the visual appeal and practical value.

A notable theme in the representation of dupes on social media is an expressed sense of urgency. This urgency is often communicated through high-energy content that encourages immediate consumer action. Astrid explains *"It's that classic video where they say 'Don't Walk, RUN", and then show something that's supposed to be a dupe"*. There seems to be a sense of urgency associated with purchasing dupe products, driven by a desire to engage with current trends and the fact that these products tend to become popular quickly and sell out fast. This can be argued as a sign of the typical modern consumer, as described by Firat and Venkatesh (1995). It can be argued that this urgency and trend focus feeds into a culture of overconsumption, where being quick to purchase becomes as important as the purchase itself. By framing dupes as must-have items that one must act quickly to obtain, these social media representations can be seen as creating and perpetuating a cycle where the value of the dupe is directly linked to consumption, encouraging a lack of resistance to capitalism in a similar vein to concerns raised by Firat and Venkatesh (1995). By understanding these representations through the lens of the Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al. 1997), we can see how the meanings attached to these products are not just about affordability and accessibility but also about capturing and capitalizing on the fleeting nature of trends.

5.2.3 Cultural Leaders

When discussing the representation of dupe culture, the interviewees come across the theme of cultural leaders. Astrid described the general dupe content creator saying, *"it's someone who is a kind of "fashion guardian", who has knowledge and is involved in spreading this further*". However, she later goes on to argue that, "*it's typically regular girls who are some kind of micro-influencer who talk about dupes. Not major influencers like Bianca Ingrosso or Victoria Paris. They don't need them"*. The observation that most content around dupes

comes from smaller influencers was echoed throughout multiple interviews, such as Sally who remarks:

> It feels like it's a lot of micro influencers, not the bigger ones. I don't think the bigger ones want to risk damaging their brand that way. They might "ruin it" for themselves if they go against the bigger brands. But yeah, a lot of "regular people" on TikTok.
> - *Sally*

While they argue differently for why smaller creators on social media are more visible regarding dupes, Astrid placing emphasis on financial factors and Sally on reputational factors, both nonetheless emphasize the prevalence of micro influencers over ones with larger followings. Klara also discusses the dominance of smaller content creators in dupe content, highlighting that *"it feels more genuine. They are more like 'ordinary people'. You can relate to them"*. This type of authenticity can be argued to make the recommendations seem more trustworthy to some viewers, who may see larger influencers as less relatable due to their wealth and access. This perception of authenticity significantly enhances the effectiveness of dupe content, and aligns the theory regarding the consumers valuing authenticity and genuineness, but also the contradiction "*The Sponsored Society*" which emphasizes the growing trend of discreet branding strategies to sidestep consumer force (Holt, 2002). However, as these tactics gain traction, consumers are becoming increasingly observant and discerning in their response (Holt, 2002). When a smaller influencer showcases a dupe, their endorsement is often perceived as a genuine and personal recommendation, not merely a sponsored advertisement as can be perceived when larger influencers show products, as further discussed by Klara. The observation that dupe content is mainly created by smaller influencers aligns with Bourdieu's (1979) theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1979) argues that individuals with higher cultural capital, such as knowledge and involvement in spreading cultural trends, are better equipped to appreciate and engage with certain cultural forms. In this context, smaller influencers, despite not having the same level of social recognition or economic resources as major influencers, possess cultural capital in the form of their engagement with and knowledge of fashion trends, including dupes. Their role as "*fashion guardians*", as described by Astrid, highlights their cultural authority within certain consumer circles, allowing them to shape taste and influence consumer practices.

5.3 Dupe Identity

This section will delve into the identity part of the Circuit of Culture and start by presenting how the interviewees perceive a dupe consumer where they emphasize who buys dupes. Further, we delve into common themes that were identified from the interviews, such as consumers participation in trends, the dupe community and consumers beliefs and personal narratives.

5.3.1 The Clever Dupe Consumer

The interviews reveal several key themes that align with the theoretical approach, highlighting how individuals perceive and interact with dupe products to construct their identities. The participants are quite representative for the general dupe consumer, according to their own description.

Firstly, Sabrina describes dupe consumers as "*financially conscious people*" and emphasizes "*why would you spend, for example, twice as much if you can buy it cheaper and spend money on other things as well?*". All participants emphasize the importance of economic considerations in their purchasing decisions and emphasize that dupe consumers manage their financial resources wisely. The culture therefore seems to value financial consciousness. This resonates with Belk's (1988) theory that possessions serve practical functions while also symbolically extending the self. By choosing dupes, individuals can achieve the desired aesthetic or social status associated with the original product at a lower cost, thereby enhancing their self-esteem and fulfilling their identity-related needs (Belk, 1988). It can, according to the participants, also paint them in a positive manner through showing their financial awareness. The dupe consumer seems to want to portray themselves as clever consumers through making these financially conscious choices.

Moreover, the participants indicate that the dupe consumers are active users of social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, aligning with observations of the digitalization of consumer practices (Belk, 2013; Cochoy, 2017). Rosalia elaborates on this by claiming that the main dupe consumers are "*Young girls, because they spend a lot of time on social media and are very trend-focused*", which majority of the interviewees agree on. Rosalia argues that there is a connection between young women, social media usage and a sensitivity to trends.

Furthermore, Rosalia's (2024) observation *"I would say a lot of young girls who want to try out a lot of different things and can't afford to buy the original product all the time",*

highlights the symbolic value of possessions in expressing one's identity (Belk, 1988). Similarly, Mia's insight about dupe consumers:

> Partly people who can't afford the more expensive versions, but also people who care about wanting them to look expensive. For some reason, it feels important for them that they should look/feel like they have the more expensive version. Then I also think a lot about young girls who, say, in middle school and high school, then maybe there's more pressure to be cool and have the right things. Maybe they don't care as much when they're older. I think it's a lot of young people. And that often corresponds to them not having enough money to buy more expensive ones. - *Mia*

Her argument highlights how consumption is often driven by aspirations and the desire for social status. It points out that people use alternatives like dupes to close the gap between who they are and who they want to be, as Belk (1988) discusses. Dupe culture acts to normalize the purchasing of dupe alternatives, allowing participants to purchase cheaper alternatives while still creating their desired identity.

5.3.2 A Trend Focused Culture

The phenomenon of dupes is closely intertwined with the trend participation, where individuals seek to align themselves with fashion or lifestyle trends without necessarily investing in high-end or luxury brands. The participants emphasized a desire to participate in trends, which was an identified common theme. Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self provides insights into how possessions, including dupes, serve as symbolic representations of identity and support individuals' participation in cultural trends and phenomena.

Astrid's observation regarding the associations between dupes and trend participation highlights the role of hype in shaping consumer practices. She argues:

> If you look at this "clean girl" trend, it's expensive shoes, New Balance, Hoka, it's like AirPods Max, for like six to seven thousand kr, similar ones are sold at Temu for like 200 kr. Now, Temu isn't that good, but, as an example. But people buy dupes to be able to participate in trends like clean girl or mob wife, which is new now. So, I would say that often when you buy a dupe, you want to follow some kind of trend. And you can do that with items that have similar shapes, that symbolize and resemble the original - *Astrid*

The emergence of trends such as the "*clean girl*" or "*mob wife*" aesthetic fuels demand for specific products or styles, driving dupe consumers to seek affordable alternatives like dupes to participate in these trends. Dupe culture therefore seems to be deeply rooted in trend participation and popular culture, both for the culture itself but also the individual dupe products that are purchased. This aligns with Belk's (1988) argument that possessions contribute to individuals' sense of being and belonging within societal and cultural contexts, where trends serve as collective markers of identity and connection. Dupe culture participants seem to want to portray themselves as trendy and aware consumers.

> It's a trend you want to be in on. It feels like you're becoming part of and experiencing what everyone is talking about without spending a lot of money on it, and then you can try some new product that is discussed without breaking the bank. - *Rosalia*

Similarly, Rosalia's comment reflects the desire to stay relevant and engage with new trends, viewing purchasing dupes as a practical and cost-effective way to participate in those trends. This further aligns with Belk's (1988) theory, with consumers seeking to adapt to changing trends to maintain their sense of identity and belonging with their social and cultural environment. The fast-paced nature of trend cycles, characterized by rapid shifts in fashion or lifestyle preferences, present challenges for individuals who may find it financially hard to keep up with the latest trends.

Astrid discusses a shift away from brand obsession towards more minimalist aesthetics:

> It feels like before there was a completely different brand obsession that doesn't exist today, and it can have to do with dupes. I think for a period it was this "Logomania". There was such a crazy logomania and there would be logos on everything. It feels like it's considered a bit tacky now. It feels more exclusive to have items with few logos. Where the brand isn't as visible. Many of the aesthetics you see trending now don't have many logos. "Clean girl" is minimalistic and it feels like that's what's in now. - *Astrid*

The view of logos as "*tacky*" reflects Holt's (1997) arguments regarding the overproduction of commodity-signs in postmodern societies, as he suggested that objects that once held high cultural capital no longer serve as reliable indicators of social class. The oversaturation of logos, according to Astrid, seems to have made their status decline. This shift may play a significant role in the rise of dupe culture, allowing for unbranded products to become trendy.

Belk (1988) argues that possessions serve not only as symbols but also as expressions of personal style and taste. The decline of logomania and the rise of minimalistic trends signal a shift towards product-oriented consumption, where individuals prioritize functionality and aesthetics over brand recognition.

Similarly, Mia and other interviewees underscore a cultural shift in attitudes towards brands, emphasizing a prioritization of style and product quality over brand identity. Mia illustrates this as:

> I think brands are less important today. For example, I think today, style is more important than the brand. So if it's a really nice bag, then it doesn't matter where it's from. I think style feels more important, especially in combination with second hand. It's more about people being excited to find nice and cool things than them being expensive and real. That could also indicate that people buy dupes because in some way it might be smarter to buy a dupe than the real thing. - *Mia*

For these participants, the focus is on finding products that align with their personal style and preferences rather than sticking to brands. This seems to reflect a broader trend for the participants towards self-expression, as they seek to establish their own unique identities through their consumption choices. Similarly Klara explains:

> I don't think it's as trendy with so much “brands, brands, brands”, but you should have your own style and then it doesn't matter what brand it is. Yeah, you're not as brand crazy. Like I said, you start shifting your focus a bit. It's not the brand that's important, but the quality of the product and that you appreciate the product, you know. - *Klara*

Bourdieu's (1979) theory of taste and social distinction emphasizes how cultural practices and preferences are shaped by social structures and serve to reproduce social inequality. By prioritizing individual style and product quality over brand identity, consumers challenge traditional hierarchies of taste and consumption, asserting their unique identities within contemporary consumer culture. This is interesting in relation to Holt’s (2002) argument that brands are an important tool for self expression for consumers. While Holt highlights that consumers tend to choose brands that reflect their values, the practices of these participants suggest that some consumers opt to express themselves through non-branded items instead.

However, the emphasis on individuality does not seamlessly align with arguments suggesting that dupes are trend-driven. While individuality and unique self-expression may themselves be societal trends, the idea that dupes quickly become fashionable and that this popularity is a key part of their appeal seems to contradict the pursuit of uniqueness. It does, however, align well with Holt's (2002) arguments concerning a growing consumer consciousness toward marketing and branding. The emergence of dupes may be an indication of the tension that Holt (2002) emphasizes, in that consumers are renegotiating the "*rules*" of the market, being less reliant on brands.

5.3.3 An Emerging Digital Community

During the interviews it was noted that there is a community surrounding dupes online. The extensive influence of social media platforms plays an important role in driving growth of dupe culture and the emergence of online communities centered on dupe products. The consumers' deep engagement with digital technology and their active participation in online communities greatly influence their preferences and practices. This engagement promotes a culture where social connections and self-expression are primarily facilitated through digital platforms.

The proliferation of social media platforms supports the quick feedback stream, where individuals receive validation and affirmation from their online communities (Belk, 2013). This shared nature of the self extends beyond personal boundaries, shaping a collective sense of identity that goes beyond individuality (Belk, 2013). This is shown among the interviewees, where for example Siri emphasizes the role of platforms like TikTok in spreading information and fostering community engagement around dupes.

> There is a community surrounding dupes on social media, yes. I feel like it is almost popular for influencers today to talk about dupes. That they want to talk about it to stay relevant on TikTok. - *Siri*

The desire to stay relevant and connected within these online spaces drives influencers and content creators to share tips and recommendations, therefore increasing the visibility and appeal of dupe products. The community is characterized and brought together by content about dupes on social media, and the discussions surrounding it. An example is Alva's reference to a Facebook group for the dupe company Essnce.

> There is this Essnce Facebook group community where people are posting pictures of their perfumes from Essnce, some have really big collections. People are also asking for tips and recommendations and sharing their thoughts. - *Alva*

This collective engagement on social media highlights the social nature of consumer culture, where participation in online groups provides opportunities for community and belonging. The formation of online communities surrounding dupes reflects a trend towards identity construction and self-expression through consumer products. Belk (2013) explores how digital communities foster a collective sense of belonging that goes beyond individual identities. Applied to the dupe culture, the active feeling of community through the exchange of tips and recommendations enhances individuals' feelings of belonging. This is further emphasized by Astrid: *"There are dupes to achieve that sense of belonging, or some form of symbolic capital, to find something similar to still be able to participate"*.

5.3.4 Consumers Beliefs and Personal Narratives

Throughout the interviews, beliefs and personal narratives were discussed in relation to dupe culture, highlighting the relationship between individual values and consumption.

> I know that Isadora was known for testing on animals in like 2014, and since then I've never bought from them due to that. So in a way, I guess I care that my purchases align with my values, I wouldn't say that I know much about companies though. If however, the company was in a huge scandal or similar I would probably avoid them. - *Siri*

Siri's decision to avoid purchasing from Isadora highlights the importance of brands aligning with personal ethical values, as highlighted by Holt (2002). While Siri admits to not being highly knowledgeable about companies, her awareness of Isadora's past practices highlights the significance of ethical considerations in her consumption decisions. This aligns with Holt's (2002) argument that consumers move towards brands that align with their values and personal narratives. Moreover, Mia's perspective on the importance of sustainability and ethical practices reveals a tension between personal values and practical considerations in consumer decision-making.

> It's difficult. I think sustainability and all those things are very important. But then you look at which stores and shops I shop from, and I can't be held accountable for them. So it's probably not that important after all, because I shop from them. - *Mia*

Belk's (1988) theory highlights how possessions contribute to identity formation and self-expression, suggesting that consumers may often prefer brands that match their values as a way to affirm their identities. However, Mia's admission that she sometimes shops at stores which may not fully align with her ethical standards illustrates the complex balance between personal values and convenience in consumer practices. While she acknowledges the importance of sustainability, Mia's pragmatic approach underscores the difficulties individuals encounter in aligning their ethical beliefs with their daily consumption choices.

5.4 Regulating Dupes

The aspect of regulation in the Circuit of Culture, as observed in the interviews, both through informal control functions and formal regulatory frameworks. Participants discussed the growing social acceptance of dupe products, reflecting shifting norms and attitudes within consumer culture. This informal regulation is evident in the widespread acknowledgment and normalization of dupes, mainly through social media. Moreover, the legality of dupes emerges as a point of consideration among participants when discussing more formal regulatory aspects.

5.4.1 Social Acceptance

The interviewees have shown a significant shift in the social acceptance of dupes, with participants expressing ideas that highlight its normalization and even trendiness, where Sabrina stated "*There are nowadays more people who recommend dupes and are proud of finding different dupes*". Siri further emphasized that "*Dupes are socially accepted, I feel like people are just stupid if they do not buy the dupe. Why spend more money on "basically" the same product?",* highlighting the existing attitude towards these products. This argument is supported by Mia, who observes the rapid expansion and normalization of dupes in various retail stores, indicating a widespread acceptance of the dupe culture.

Paulina's perspective adds depth to the understanding by linking the social acceptance of dupes to economic diversity and influencer culture.

> Yes, I would say it is socially accepted. I think it's because everyone has a different economic status and people like influencers who have themselves as their brand need to be able to reach out and be relatable to everyone for them to be successful in a way, then they cannot just hate on people who buy dupes. And if influencers talk about and recommend dupes, it becomes more normal. - *Paulina*

Her argument aligns with the concept of regulation, where informal controls such as social norms and expectations shape the acceptability of certain consumer practices (Du Gay et al. 1997). The acceptance of dupes by influencers, who often portray themselves as relatable to a diverse audience, contributes to the normalization of them, according to Paulina.

Moreover, the influence of social media emerges as a central theme in the participants' statements. Sabrina and Siri highlight the role of platforms like TikTok and Instagram in popularizing dupes, with Paulina emphasizing the trust placed in non-sponsored content over brand messaging.

> I found out about dupes through people who are recommending dupes on social media, especially on TikTok and Instagram. - *Sabrina*

> I definitely see a trend going on about dupes, most likely due to social media and TikTok. I see it all the time on every social media platform. - *Siri*

> I think that I would trust social media more if the person isn't paid to make their content because if they aren't paid for it it's often their honest opinion about the product. While the brand would only say the good stuff about their own brand.
> - *Paulina*

This reflects that the consumers purchasing decisions are heavily influenced by peer recommendations and genuine engagement on social media platforms. Thus, the preference of dupes over branded products seems to be linked to perceptions of authenticity and trust. Not to mention, all the participants express a greater trust in social media content creators who provide unbiased opinions on products, as opposed to branded content and websites that were perceived as more biased. For example Klara argued *"I'll trust a girl in a similar situation as me with her own financial circumstances a hundred percent more than the companies and big influencers that just want to sell more"*. This highlights the consumers' discerning approach to marketing messages and their leaning towards authenticity, as highlighted by Holt (2002). Consequently, social media platforms serve as potent channels for cultural intermediaries to challenge conventional ideas of brand prestige and exclusivity, thereby reshaping consumer preferences.

Moreover, the participants have presented a general association of pride with dupes, suggesting that consumers derive a sense of accomplishment from finding and showcasing these alternative products. Siri and Paulina emphasize the pride associated with discovering and discussing dupes, both online and in real life. Siri argued that "*Pride is definitely associated with dupes, I almost feel like people can brag about finding dupes both in real life and on social media"*. This aligns with the psychological tensions identified in counterfeit consumption, where consumers seek to rationalize their practices and use strategies to maintain social position (Dubois et al. 2021; Li et al. 2020).

5.4.2 Tensions and Justifications

Drawing from the concept of regulation (Du Gay et al. 1997), participants seem to navigate internal conflicts surrounding the acceptability of dupes within broader societal and cultural contexts. While many interviewees expressed a positive attitude to dupes, there were also indications of internal tensions surrounding them. This was further expressed through the justifications made in order to minimize potential discomfort. These tensions and justifications have similarities to those found by Dubois et al. (2021) in relation to counterfeit consumption. This can be shown through Mia's comment *"It's like I'm lying a little, it wouldn't have felt so good"*. presenting a discomfort with not openly acknowledging that something she owns is a dupe. Furthermore, Mia stated:

> I am open about my dupes. It feels better, because in a way it feels more embarrassing that I have a dupe if other people understand that it's a dupe but they think I believe it's genuine. Much rather than that, it's obvious that it's a dupe, because I don't think that's embarrassing. Of course, it can be smart to buy a dupe, as I said since I don't think it's worth buying expensive bags then it's very smart to buy it instead, but then it should be clear that it is a dupe. - *Mia*

Mia's emphasis on honesty and clarity regarding dupe consumption also highlights the importance of maintaining personal integrity, especially within social contexts where authenticity is valued, as argued by Holt (2002). Moreover, this openness around dupes is interesting in relation to Li et al. (2020) and their findings surrounding strategies used to minimize risk with counterfeit consumption. Here, Mia legitimizes her dupe purchases by being open with them. Even if she thinks it can be embarrassing with dupes, she prefers to be transparent about them, as a form of strategy to protect her integrity. Furthermore, Astrid

highlights that dupe purchases can give her complex feelings, wherein feelings of happiness are tempered by a sense of impostor syndrome:

> Well, you kind of feel happy, but you also know that it's not the real thing. Deep down, you know that, outwardly it looks like you can participate in some kind of higher context, but deep down you know that, shit, it's not real. It becomes a kind of happy feeling, but it's fake. You get a kind of impostor feeling. I might save a bit more or work a bit more so that I can buy the real thing. Because deep down, you still have that feeling. - *Astrid*

Astrid's statement sheds light on the discussion regarding authenticity (Hietanen et al. 2020; Holt, 2002; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). The act of consuming dupes is not regarded as authentic for Astrid. This emotional conflict underscores the psychological tension between the symbolic value of possessions and the desire for genuine self-expression, as suggested by Belk (1988; 2013) While she may experience a fleeting sense of happiness from purchasing dupes, Astrid's feelings of being an impostor reveal a deeper yearning for authenticity. This longing is echoed in her desire for original items, which she perceives as possessing an inherent authenticity and the "magical" quality associated with luxury consumption, as described by Yuran (2016). Astrid elaborates by giving an example from her personal experiences:

> I would say that in my class… I study fashion science, if you were to come with a dupe there... it feels rude if you were to go up to someone and ask if what they're wearing is a copy or a dupe. It feels like in my class, people see through it very quickly and that people might look down on it a bit. And then there is this shame. I would rather just admit it to people. I bought a bag that was very clearly a dupe of Gucci, and then I said "yeah, here I come with my "Fucci" bag.". Fake Gucci. Then you've admitted it rather than someone else doing it for you. You own it. If you were to say that it's genuine even though you know it's a dupe, then people in my class would see it as if you have poor knowledge. It would probably be more like "oh, she doesn't get that it's a dupe", rather than that I bought a dupe. Then I think it depends on what type of company. If it were a larger company, like Gucci, then no one would probably care. But if it were about smaller brands, then people would probably wonder why you're not supporting that brand. - *Astrid*

Looking at Bourdieu's (1979) theory, the judgment and shame surrounding dupes can indicate that dupes may be considered bad taste within Astrid's circle of students within fashion science. The group seems to have a shared cultural knowledge of fashion, which values being educated about fashion. Notably, she does not believe that the judgment is based on the dupe purchase itself, but rather that she would be seen as uneducated and not be aware that the product is inspired by another, high-end product. This further indicates that it takes a certain cultural capital, in Bourdieu's (1979) terms, and knowledge to be able to partake fully in dupe culture. Her open acknowledgment of dupe purchases and joking approach to them serves as a form of strategy against potential judgment and stigma, which can also be seen as navigating and countering what is considered acceptable in her social circles. She is taking control of the narrative and actively avoiding being seen as uneducated within her circle, as well as emphasizing authenticity and transparency. Moreover, her discussion surrounding dupes of bigger as opposed to smaller brands shows a certain scale of what is acceptable and not. She argues that it would be more acceptable to purchase from a larger brand, while smaller brand dupes would be more negatively received. By differentiating between the impacts of purchasing dupes from larger versus smaller brands, Astrid touches on broader discussions concerning consumer ethics and the socio-economic dimensions of fashion choices. On a similar note, Sally brought up the implications regarding originality of dupe culture:

> It's a pity for the original company. Like Charlotte Tilbury. It's unfortunate that they've developed a product and now everyone's making it. Their concept is stolen, but that's how it is with everything. It's not just dupes versus original, but everything that's created is imitated if it's good. - *Sally*

While many participants may rationalize dupe purchases as economically efficient, Sally's and Astrid perspectives highlight reflection on the broader consequences of consumer practices on original creators and cultural production. While Sally notes that dupes are stealing an original concept, she also rationalizes them by arguing that *"everything that's created is imitated if it's good"*. This also acts as a sort of justification for consumers.

Additionally, a common justification among the participants was emphasizing how dupes are different from counterfeits. Such as Klara expressing that *"It's not that they're just doing a straight up copy in a worse version, just something similar in good quality"*. Klara's commentary dives into the symbolic significance of dupes as a form of creative

reinterpretation, rather than mere imitation. She argues that dupes differ from counterfeiting, as they offer a unique spin on established designs while offering good quality, unlike counterfeits. By differentiating between the two, the majority of the participants seemed to rationalize their consumption practices, considering dupes acceptable within ethical and legal boundaries. This differentiation allowed participants to see dupes as legitimate alternatives that are not violating legal rights or tricking consumers. Thus, participants' emphasis on the differentiation between dupes and counterfeits serves as a justification for their engagement in dupe culture, framing their consumption practices within a frame of authenticity and legality.

5.5 Production of Dupes

In this section, we will explore the production aspect of the Circuit of Culture. Through our interviews, several themes of interest were found. Firstly, it became evident that consumers perceive dupe brands as legitimate in contrast to counterfeit brands. Secondly, interviewees expressed a distrust in brands. Lastly, consumers demonstrated a lack of appreciation for product originality, and expressed a feeling that brands are losing value.

5.5.1 Dupe Brands Perceived as Legitimate

Du Gay et al. (1997) emphasize how producers are important in the meaning attached to cultural artifacts. In relation to this, one theme found among the participants was that it is important that producers behind dupe brands are perceived as legitimate. Rosalia expressed her preference as:

> I want it to be a legit brand and not some imported thing from China that I don't know where it comes from. For example, NYX has many makeup dupes, and you know it's a legitimate and established brand. - *Rosalia*

This indicates that familiarity and trust in the brand's reputation are important factors in her purchasing decision. This aligns with Holt's (2002) discussion on consumer culture, where authenticity and relevance are valued over traditional ideas of brand loyalty. Additionally, Rosalia's emphasis on avoiding "*imported things from China*" highlights the significance of origin and transparency in consumer choices, aligning with Holt's (2002) critique of brands attempts at authenticity.

Furthermore, Klara highlights the dual importance of affordability and quality in dupe consumption.

> For me, it's not just about getting a cheaper product, I also don't want to be scammed or get poor quality. That's the whole point with dupes - good quality for a good price. - *Klara*

She emphasizes the balance between price and quality, indicating that dupe brands offer a likely alternative to expensive products without compromising on quality. This differentiates dupes from traditional views of counterfeit products as having low quality, such as those expressed by Bloch (1993), Lai and Zaichowsky (1999) and Eisend and Schuchert-Güler (2008). But, she also emphasizes not wanting to get scammed, indicating that she values security and authenticity. This resonates with Holt's (2002) argument that postmodern consumers seek brands that align with their values and personal narratives, prioritizing authenticity over loyalty to big corporations.

Moreover, this statement made by Sally, *"I would only buy a dupe if it's from a brand I knew before. I wouldn't go and buy it from a bazaar. There still has to be a legit brand behind it"*, strengthening the idea of legitimacy associated with dupe brands when purchased from reputable sources. She differentiates between buying from a legitimate brand versus purchasing from a *'bazaar'*, emphasizing the importance of a credible brand behind the product. As well, Astrid brought up the perspective of ethical consumption mentioning:

> Now, I don't shop at Temu, but if I were to find a dupe on Temu or AliExpress, when people buy Adidas Sambas and post that they found them there. It wouldn't feel nice. It feels good if you find a dupe that's kind of sustainable, if you can think like that. H&M isn't the best brand but it's not Temu, it's not AliExpress. It's still a kind of fair consumption, if you can call it that. - *Astrid*

She associates legitimacy with sustainability and fair consumption practices, suggesting that dupe brands can align with ethical values despite not being luxury brands. This aligns with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) framework of liberatory postmodernism, where consumers

engage in acts of resistance against traditional ideas of consumption by prioritizing ethical considerations.

Furthermore, Mia highlights the role of social media in legitimizing dupe brands:

> Mostly I buy from sites and stores I've bought from before, just because it feels comfortable and safe. It's very rare that I buy from sites I haven't heard of before. But if I were to do that then I would probably search for reviews and check with friends who have shopped there. But otherwise when I'm going to buy things, there is absolutely a lot of social media. I usually try to see if I can find pictures on the company's page, if they're tagged or so. - *Mia*

She relies on reviews and endorsements from friends as well as visual cues from social media platforms to assess the legitimacy of brands before making a purchase. This aligns with Holt's (2002) argument on the influence of social media's purchasing practices, where genuine authenticity is valued over traditional marketing tactics.

Overall, participants in dupe culture place value in that the dupe brands they consume are perceived as legitimate. These perceptions are shaped by factors such as brand reputation, origin, affordability, and social media presence.

5.5.2 A Growing Distrust in Brands

A central theme presented among the participants is a degree of distrust in brands. One common argument among the participants is concern and fear of being misled or scammed by high-priced brands. For example, Rosalia argued:

> I buy dupes because it's cheaper, and I often feel that I don't want to be scammed by more expensive brands, if it's exactly the same ingredients and so on. If you're just paying for, like for example Drunk Elephant, then you're just paying for the cool packaging and the name but the ingredients are exactly the same, or almost like another cream. I feel scammed if I spend a lot of money on such a thing. - *Rosalia*

Furthermore, her claim that the ingredients in certain products are often identical, regardless of the brand, highlights the perception of inflated prices solely for the sake of branding and packaging. This argument, presented by a majority of the participants, resonates with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) critique of modern consumerism, which emphasizes the construction of consumer identity through media and marketing, rather than genuine product differentiation.

Rosalia's unwillingness to pay premium prices for perceived identical products reflects a shift in consumer attitudes toward value and authenticity, as argued by Holt (2002), where consumers increasingly seek products that align with their personal narratives and values.

Similarly, Sabrina's argument of the variation in pricing between well-known brands and comparable alternatives suggests a growing awareness among consumers of the branding premium.

> I think it's because famous brands have a much higher price just because they are a well-known brand and have customers who will buy them because of it. I think people have started to realize that and that you can find a similar, or almost the same, product at a better price. - *Sabrina*

This aligns with Holt's (2002) claim that postmodern consumers prioritize authenticity and relevance over brand loyalty, challenging the traditional idea of corporate paternalism. Sabrina's observation of the availability of similar products at better prices indicates a desire to reclaim power from big brands, aligning with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) concept of liberatory postmodernism, where consumer resistance serves as a form of empowerment.

Furthermore, Siri emphasized her perception of expensive brands as potentially irrelevant or mistrusted as cheaper alternatives highlights the decrease of brand legitimacy in contemporary consumer cultures.

> I almost feel like the expensive one then becomes irrelevant or mistrusted, like how can this company charge that much for a product when another company can do the same at a much cheaper price, it's almost like I am getting scammed by the more expensive company. - *Siri*

Her skepticism toward high prices, combined with a preference for transparent and fairly priced alternatives, reflects a rejection of traditional branding paradigms. This view aligns with Holt's (2002) claim that postmodern consumers engage in communal forms of brand connection and value authenticity over corporate messaging. Moreover, Siri's emphasis on the empowerment of smaller companies through successful imitation further illustrates the potential of consumer-driven innovation in challenging established markets by saying that dupe brands *"[...] doesn't feel like they are trying to scam you and take overprice. And it also*

feels like they are transparent with the quality you can get for a lower price". Similarly, Sally explained:

> A little like I mentioned with Charlotte Tilbury and the companies that create original products being imitated, for example, but I don't feel very sorry for multi-billion dollar companies. It's fun that other smaller companies succeed. - *Sally*

The lack of sympathy for multi-billion dollar companies targeted by dupe culture highlights a broader cultural shift in consumer attitudes toward large corporations. Her claim that smaller companies' success in replicating original products is enjoyable suggests a re-evaluation of traditional ideas of intellectual property and brand exclusivity. This opinion resonates with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) critique of modern consumer society, which highlights the tension between individual expression and corporate control. Sally's perspective reflects a growing attitude among consumers that challenges the dominant narratives of corporate dominance and consumer passivity.

Klara's preference for dupe products over original brands, highlights the changing dynamics of brand loyalty and consumer choice. She argues that:

> The only ones affected by dupes are probably the big companies that can't patent their ideas anymore and have to compete more. But, I don't think they lose that much in the long run. I don't see how it can harm anyone else. Either way, it gives consumers better conditions. The big companies have to keep their prices down so more people can afford it. But, it might also lead to overconsumption, so it's... both good and bad things. - *Klara*

Her view that the only ones affected are big companies highlights the potential of dupe culture in reshaping markets. Klara's acknowledgment of both the benefits and disadvantages of dupe culture reflects the complex interaction between consumer empowerment and overconsumption. This perspective aligns with Holt's (2002) argument that consumer culture is constantly evolving, with consumers actively shaping cultural norms and market dynamics through their choices. Dupe culture can therefore be argued as a form of countercultural movement, with its participants being willing to participate due to this distrust in brands. While dupe brands are also brands, it seems they are perceived as more authentic through their lower prices.

5.5.3 A Decreasing Value for Originality and Brands

Through the interviews, it is evident that there is a view among consumers regarding the decreasing importance of brands, especially in relation to the perceived value of products. Sabrina's statement that, "*Most people don't think that the brand matters. The product itself is the important thing, so if you could find it cheaper it's just better*", highlights a common belief among the participants that the quality of the product outweighs the value of the brand attached to it. This view reflects the shifting consumer mindset away from traditional brand loyalty towards an approach focused on maximizing value for money. Sabrina's comment highlights the idea that consumers are increasingly prioritizing utility and affordability over brand prestige.

Similarly, Siri's argument aligns with Sabrina's comment by emphasizing her indifference towards brands as long as the product meets her requirements and is offered at a competitive price point. *"I don't really care about brands so I don't mind if it is another brand if the product is similar for a cheaper price"*. Her willingness to consider alternative brands if they offer similar quality at a lower price further highlights the idea that brand loyalty is becoming less influential in consumer decision-making processes. This aligns with the idea that consumers are actively seeking products that align with their personal values and narratives, rather than being swayed solely by brand associations, as argued by Holt (2002).

Moreover, the observations from Sabrina and Siri resonate with the concepts of postmodern consumer culture and the contradictions presented within it, as presented by Holt (2002). The idea that consumers are becoming increasingly discerning and skeptical of branding efforts aligns with the contradiction of "*Authenticity Extinction*" (Holt, 2022). Consumers like Sabrina and Siri are more inclined to prioritize practical value and authenticity in their purchasing decisions, rejecting branding efforts perceived as inauthentic or manipulative.

Furthermore, the interviewees reflect the influence of social media and digital technologies on contemporary consumer practices, as discussed in the theory on social media's role in shaping consumer preferences. Siri mentioned that:

> Brands are less important, customers might change brands if the same quality product is offered cheaper somewhere else. I believe that a higher price is automatically associated with higher quality in our minds, but if you can find the same quality cheaper then why pay much more? - *Siri*

This highlights the impact of online platforms in supporting price comparison and information accessibility, thereby challenging traditional ideas of brand value and loyalty.

Another central theme found among some participants was that originality was not highly valued. For example, Klara argued that:

> That dupes aren't original doesn't bother me. I have bigger problems than that (laughs). People are dying. I don't really care about the name of who made it, as long as I like the product. It's the product I'm after, not the label that comes with it for a higher price. - *Klara*

Her perspective reflects a prioritization of practical concerns over abstract ideas of authenticity or brand prestige. By expressing indifference towards the originality of products and emphasizing the importance of personal preference and product quality, Klara exemplifies the consumer mindset discussed within the context of postmodern consumer culture. Further, her comment that she is more concerned about larger issues, such as societal problems and personal circumstances, than the originality of products highlights a broader shift in consumer priorities. This aligns with Holt's (2002) view on values and consumption. Klara places more emphasis on pragmatic considerations, rather than caring for the originality of brands.

Additionally, Sabrina's perspective further strengthens the idea that consumers are becoming increasingly pragmatic and accepting of alternatives to original products. Her acknowledgement *"I don't feel anything special for originality, If I choose to buy a dupe I know that there will be some differences, and that's fine*", highlights the growing acceptance of alternative products within contemporary consumer culture. This perspective resonates with Holt's (2002) argument that the postmodern consumer's rejection of traditional branding paradigms. Finally, Rosalia emphasized:

> I still respect those who make the original products, so in my situation, it's more that I don't have a lot of money to spend on certain things. Maybe if you were 40 and working, it would be another thing. Then maybe I would want to support them instead. Now I feel like I don't really need to do that. - *Rosalia*

Rosalia's view provides insights into the intersection of consumer practices and socio-economic factors. Her acknowledgement of the value of supporting original product

creators, combined with her observation of personal financial constraints, highlights the complex interaction between consumer identity, social responsibility, and economic realities. Rosalia's perspective aligns with Holt's (2002) argument that consumer-driven innovation and experimentation, where consumers may prioritize affordability and pragmatism over brand loyalty or support for original creators.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the construction of an emergent digital consumer culture. The analysis, grounded in our theoretical approach, has provided insights into the construction of dupe culture, and its characteristics. This discussion section will present the main findings in relation to the research questions and previous research.

6.1 The Construction of Dupe Culture

The first research question for this thesis was "*How is the emerging dupe culture constructed in practice?"*. By utilizing the Circuit of Culture by Du Gay et al. (1997), we explored the construction through all five stages of the model - consumption, representation, identity, regulation and production.

Throughout all stages of the construction of the dupe culture, social media emerges as a constant influence, essentially producing and reproducing the dupe culture (see Figure 2).

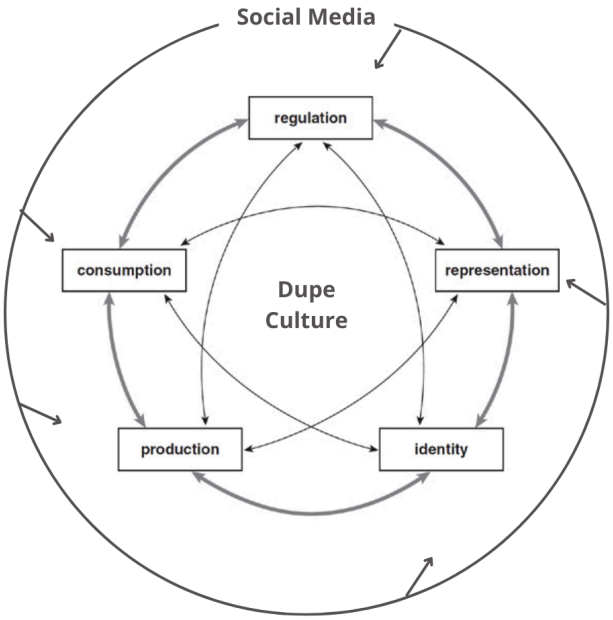

Figure 2. The Digital Circuit of Culture (adapted from Du Gay et al. 1997)

The *consumption* of dupes is highly guided by social and digital media. It is through social media that the participants find and interact with the dupe culture, making it evident that dupe culture acts as a clear example of consumer culture constructed through social media. Digital media is vital for the construction of dupe culture, both through spreading the culture itself, but also being available as a tool for consumers to make informed choices, further showcasing Jenkins and Denegri-Knott's (2017) notion that digital devices act as extensions of the consumers' minds. By actively seeking information online prior to purchase and sharing their experiences with others post-purchase, it was clear that dupe consumers are attempting to make informed and smart consumption choices. Furthermore, this access of information and community online appears to allow for a wider range of consumers to collect cultural capital, challenging traditional notions of taste and social stratification discussed by Bourdieu (1979).

In relation to *representation*, social media is shown to be vital in the representation of dupes. Dupe brands were discussed as rarely disclosing that their products are dupes themselves, rather social media has the primary role in giving dupes their meaning within the dupe culture and its participants. Dupes were found to be represented in relation to the product they are imitated, aligning with Du Gay et al. (1997) and their argument that meaning is given to cultural artifacts through comparison. Furthermore, dupe culture does not appear to be tied to the brands that produce the dupes for representation, but rather to the specific products that gain traction and become viral.

Regarding *identity*, the dupe consumer seems to want to portray themselves as financially conscious, clever and trendy in relation to their consumption. In relation to Belk (1988; 2013) and his theory on Possessions and the Extended Self, dupes were mainly seen as an accessible way for consumers to find a sense of belonging and be able to participate in trends, regardless of their financial status. Furthermore, some interviewees noted that there was an oversaturation of logos on the market, which is an interesting finding in relation to Holt (1997) and his discussion of the overproduction of commodity signs, suggesting brands may be losing value for some consumers. Additionally, the strong online community was noted as an important aspect of participation in dupe culture, indicating a collective sense of identity in the digital space, as discussed by Belk (2013).

Regarding the *regulation* of dupes, participants primarily discussed how dupes, as opposed to counterfeits, have become socially accepted. This has occurred both through the culture's

strong presence and trendiness on social media, as well as the simple fact that dupes are legal, which minimizes much of the discomfort associated with consuming counterfeits (Dubois et al. 2021; Li et al. 2020). However, the dupe culture also seems to be plagued by certain tensions and justifications for some, even giving some consumers feelings of impostor syndrome. This gives rise to discussions about authenticity (Holt, 2002; Hietanen et al. 2020) and taste (Bourdieu, 1979), as well as strategies to minimize these feelings.

Finally, the element of *production* was presented. An important element here was again the comparison with counterfeit products, with the participants perceiving dupe brands as legitimate as opposed to counterfeit producers. Notably, a level of mistrust toward premium brands was expressed, paving the way for discussions about brand authenticity. Furthermore, the study also highlights a general decline in the value attributed to traditional brands, further legitimizing the participation in the dupe culture. As consumers become more educated and skeptical about the marketing tactics of premium brands, combined with the accessible information of online reviews, there is a noticeable decrease in the premium that consumers are willing to pay for a brand name alone.

6.2 Characteristics of Dupe Culture

The second research question of the thesis was: *"What characterizes the dupe culture?"*. The analysis consistently highlighted the central role of social media and digital communities in shaping this consumer culture. Social media emerged as crucial in helping participants discover dupe products and introduce them into the surrounding culture, underscoring its importance in the construction and reproduction of dupe culture.

A significant characteristic of dupe culture was found to be its viral nature. Social media platforms, such as TikTok, allow for the rapid spread of information and trends, becoming a vital element of dupe culture. The interviewees emphasized how trendiness and social media are important aspects of why they found and interacted with the culture. Thus, social media algorithms play a key role in amplifying these trends and ensuring that dupe products reach a relevant audience that is susceptible to the dupe culture. However, dupes were identified as characterized by trendiness as well as a sense of urgency, contributing to a culture of overconsumption. This phenomenon raises concerns about postmodern capitalism, as discussed in the work of Firat and Venkatesh (1995).

The most explicitly expressed characteristic of dupe culture was found to be a kind of economic consciousness. As inflation rises and more people experience economic uncertainty, the participants increasingly value affordability without wanting to compromise on quality. In these challenging times, dupe culture allows consumers to participate in trends and create their identity, regardless of their income level. Dupe culture makes it more acceptable, and even encourages, its participants to buy more affordable alternatives to expensive brands.

The social acceptance of dupes illustrates a cultural shift toward pragmatism in consumption. Consumers do not see dupe purchases as a compromise, but as a clever economic choice that does not sacrifice quality. This shift challenges established paradigms focused on brand prestige and signals a re-evaluation of consumer values and priorities.

The dupe culture is also defined by the informed nature of its participants. There seems to be a community around sharing and recommending of good dupes, as well as a generally informed approach to consumption. The dupe consumer uses social media and search engines to do research before making a purchase. This may be another aspect of dupe culture that challenges traditional marketing literature, as it can be argued that brands are no longer as powerful a marker of quality and safety for the dupe consumer. Furthermore, this informed nature reinforces Baudrillard's (1988) arguments that consumers play an active role in their consumption. This is also interesting when considering Bourdieu's (1979) theory of taste and social distinction, as dupe culture both provides cultural capital through its community and sharing, and encourages economic consumption for its members.

In relation to the informed nature of the dupe culture, quality was highlighted as an important element of consumption within the dupe culture. Several interviewees emphasized that they would only purchase dupes if they perceived no trade-off in quality. This emphasis on quality distinguishes dupes from counterfeits, where research has generally found that the brand elements of the counterfeit are more important than the quality of the product itself (Gentry et al. 2001). Interestingly, rather the opposite of an attitude toward highly branded products seems to be prevalent in this culture.

Thus, another characteristic of dupe culture was found to be a certain disregard and distaste for highly visible branding and logos. Several participants expressed how they had a negative view of excessive logos. Gentry et al. (2001) point out that the conspicuousness of luxury

brands makes them easier for counterfeiters to imitate. Dupes counter this by exploiting the qualities of the original products without copying the logos or brand elements. Dupes represent a product attribute-oriented evolution of counterfeiting that is more in line with the values and preferences of the dupe culture, which is less fascinated by logos and brands.

Social motivations have been argued as the main reason for counterfeit consumption (Wilcox et al. 2009). This also seems to be true for dupes as well, which were described as an important tool for self-expression, similar to Belk (1988) and Baudrillard (1988). Participants mentioned buying dupes in order to fit in and to participate in trends, all very social forms of consumption. The aspect of social motivations is further indicated by the social nature of the dupe culture itself, in its strong community on social media and in real life.

The interviewees did not *express* the same sense of shame about buying dupe products that is often associated with counterfeits (Dubois et al. 2021). Rather, they expressed pride in making clever purchases and wanting to share them with friends and other community members. These positive feelings, as well as their social acceptability, can be argued as a strong reason for why such a strong culture and community seems to have been built around these artifacts, as opposed to around counterfeits. Even though they rely on comparison to other brands for their success, dupe products have their own brands and identities to some extent, making it possible for consumers to create a culture around them.

In contrast to this, some interviewees expressed tensions and justifications regarding their dupe purchases, with some using certain strategies to minimize these tensions. The main strategy discussed was to be open about dupe purchases with others. These strategies differ from those previously explored in counterfeiting research, where the strategies are usually based on not being "caught" for buying such products (Li et al. 2020). With dupes, there seems to be more shame associated with trying to disguise their purchases as something else. Rather, the interviewees preferred to be open about their purchases and share them with others, suggesting that traits of transparency and honesty are highly valued within the dupe culture.

Another important feature of dupe culture was found to be an evolving notion of authenticity. Participants in this study did not perceive original brands as more authentic in the context of dupes, but rather the opposite. Similar to Hietanen et al. (2020) and their discussion of the complexities of brand authenticity in contemporary consumption, the participants in this

study were looking for alternatives to overpriced premium products. The existence of lower-priced options with similar levels of quality seems to have given rise to the dupe culture, as a form of countermovement to the premium brands. The fact that dupe brands can deliver similar quality for lower prices seems to have fueled the anti-branding sentiment that Holt (2002) discusses. This phenomenon takes Holt's (2002) discussion of resistance and countercultural movements and applies it to a contemporary consumer culture.

The perceived misbehavior of more premium brands thus seems to have paved the way for the emergence of dupe culture. Dupe culture seems to act as a counterculture to the perceived inauthenticity of more expensive brands, in line with Holt's (2002) theory of the dialectical relationship between consumer culture and brands. Consumers question the justification for high prices when comparable products are available for less, reflecting a broader disenchantment with traditional brand authenticity. In the realm of dupes, our findings show that consumers are placing less value on the originality of products. In the context of dupes, it is the functionality and cost-effectiveness that attract consumers rather than the prestige of originality.

7. Conclusions

This study examined the construction of a digital consumer culture through semi-structured interviews with Gen Z consumers who consume dupes. The concluding section will highlight the study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, and provide recommendations for further research.

In this study, we showed that dupes are more than just imitations of other products - they have an entire consumer culture built around them. The dupe culture was confirmed to be reproduced and produced on social media, making it a vivid example of a digital consumer culture. The aspects of algorithms and viral reach in influencing and drawing in consumers into the culture were crucial to the spread and construction of the culture. Since social media was found to be influential in all steps of the Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al. 1997), the model was adapted to include this constant influence regarding the construction of dupe culture, a digital consumer culture.

An important finding was the informed nature behind consumption choices within the dupe culture, where the interviewees consistently did extensive research before making purchases.

Here, social media and digital media were shown to have an important role in providing such information in an accessible and trustworthy manner. Interviewees no longer felt the need to rely on brands as a marker of product quality, as social media can provide this in a more impartial and trustworthy way.

In addition, the participants expressed a certain disregard for brands and logos, expressing that they were more interested in the product attributes rather than which brand it possessed. These consumers expressed a preference for less prominent logos and branding on products. This complicates discussions about counterfeiting, as previous discussions have debated whether less conspicuous branding would make luxury brands less susceptible to counterfeiting (Wilcox et al. 2009; Gentry et al. 2001). Dupes argue against this, as they do not bear logos of the original brand, yet they are becoming such a large phenomenon and culture. The dupe culture challenges traditional notions of branding and marketing, making it critical for brands to evaluate how they can provide value for their consumers. If another manufacturer can create a similar product of equivalent quality - an established brand may not be enough to convince the dupe consumer.

Dupe culture was also found to challenge traditional definitions of authenticity. Participants did not perceive original brands as more authentic than dupe brands, but rather the opposite, with dupe brands making more expensive brands seem inauthentic due to their high prices and the marketing strategies that emphasize brand prestige over actual product quality. Consumers in the dupe culture question the value proposition of these brands, especially when dupes offer similar quality at a fraction of the cost. Dupe culture thus appears to challenge traditional understandings of what is considered authentic and what is not in branding and marketing literature. Social media platforms amplify the voices of consumers and provide a space to share honest reviews and experiences. This transparency challenges the traditional marketing narratives of original brands and supports the perception of dupes as authentic alternatives. Social media-driven consumer culture emphasizes peer recommendations and collective wisdom over brand messaging, reinforcing the idea that authenticity lies in shared validation of product quality.

Furthermore, the rise of dupe culture can also be seen as a countercultural movement against the dominance of traditional brands. Consumers participate in dupe culture as a form of resistance to what they perceive as the exploitation and false promises of premium brands. This is consistent with Holt's (2002) view of consumer culture as a space in which individuals

and groups resist the perceived inauthenticity of brands. Dupe culture's emphasis on value, quality, and community-driven authenticity represents a shift in consumer values where authenticity is not tied to the prestige and originality of the brand, but rather to its ability to meet consumers' needs and expectations in a transparent and honest manner.

In summary, the emergence of dupes marks a significant cultural shift in consumer markets, driven by social media and digital communities. This shift challenges traditional dynamics and requires brands to adapt to changing consumer values and priorities. The dupe culture, as both a result and driver of these shifts, contributes to the ongoing dialogue on the dialectical relationship between consumer culture and brands.

7.1 Further research

Building on the findings of this thesis on dupe culture, future research can explore numerous promising avenues to expand our understanding of digital consumer cultures. While this study focused on dupe culture with a specific demographic, further research could include a more diverse selection of participants to examine how dupe culture is constructed across different social groups and whether there are similarities or differences. Additionally, expanding the research to include corporate perspectives could provide insights into the production aspects of the Circuit of Culture, complementing the consumer perspectives presented here.

In addition, investigating other digital consumer cultures could provide needed depth and breadth to the consumer culture research in digital contexts. Another option is to use other methodologies, such as netnography, which would be particularly useful for studying digital consumer cultures within the digital environments in which they are constructed. Exploring other digital consumer cultures might also reveal unique patterns and implications of how these cultures are constructed and experienced. Furthermore, the role of algorithms and online communities in the construction of digital consumer cultures could be further explored, providing important insights for the field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

Overall, integrating a cultural perspective into the study of digital consumption, and vice versa, can enhance existing theoretical frameworks and approaches. By synthesizing insights from cultural studies, sociology, marketing, and psychology, researchers can develop a more nuanced understanding of how digital technologies shape and are shaped by consumer cultures.

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Appendices

APPENDIX X. Consent Form

SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

Consent form

Consumer attitudes to "dupe culture"

To those participating in the study:

We appreciate your participation in our study on dupe culture. The purpose of the interview is to examine consumer attitudes to dupes and the culture that surrounds it. The interviews will be conducted individually and consist of open-ended questions, allowing you the opportunity to openly express your opinions and attitudes. Your participation in the study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed for use in the study in the form of quotes. As an interviewee, your name will be changed to ensure your anonymity. The data collected from the study will be used solely for research purposes.

Your consent is necessary for the completion of this study.
By consenting, you acknowledge that you have read the information regarding the study and consent to your participation.

• I consent to having read the above information and approve of it

Name and date: _____

Signature: _____

Print name: _____

APPENDIX Y. Interview Guide

Introduction

- Can you describe your last dupe purchase? *The process*. *When, what, where, why?*
- How would you define a dupe?
- Have dupes changed your consumption habits?
- How do you find out about dupe products?
- Can you explain how content surrounding dupes is? *Visually, verbally, demographics.*
- How do you know something is a dupe?
- Would you say that dupes are socially accepted? Why/why not?
- Do you see any issues with dupes/dupe culture?
- What is important to you when purchasing a dupe?
- What types of brands do you purchase dupes from?
- Why do you purchase dupes?
- Who would you say is the general dupe consumer?
- Is there a community surrounding dupes? How do you see it?

Open up for comments and questions.