

The Power of the Unseen

Invisibility as the Language of Self-Expression

by

Elisabeth Jurgeleit and Kristina Spitzer

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Abstract

This study explores the underlying motivations that lead middle-class consumers to eschew visible branding in favor of more inconspicuous forms of brands in their expression of self. Within the framework of contemporary Consumer Culture Theory, identity construction through symbolic consumption has been extensively examined. In this context, fashion, particularly the use of branded logos, has been widely recognized as a powerful medium for the articulation of identity within social settings. Such symbolic displays function as mechanisms for social distinction, group affiliation, social class, and the reinforcement of hierarchical social structures. However, a cultural shift is occurring, particularly within the luxury segment, characterized by a movement away from overt brand displays toward more minimalist and subtle branding. Despite this trend, existing literature inadequately addresses the research gap concerning why middle-class consumers deliberately avoid visible branding for self-expression. Accordingly, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of consumer behaviour in relation to brand invisibility and its significance in the expression of personal identity.

The research is based on twenty interviews, investigated through a qualitative analysis and further compared and contrasted to existing academic literature. The findings reveal middle-class consumers' four principal motivations underlying the avoidance of overt branding: the Articulation of Maturity, the Expression of Authenticity, the Signaling of Exclusivity, and the Active Control of Social Perception. These insights contribute to a more critical consumer awareness, concerning the anchored assumption of the social importance of visible branding, while recognizing the significance of invisible branding in self-expression. Furthermore, the results highlight an emerging transformation in consumer behaviour, indicating that what was once perceived as a niche trend in the luxury segment, is evolving into a broader social movement within the fashion industry. The data also offer valuable implications for marketers, enabling a more concrete understanding of middle-class consumer perspectives, potentially assisting for more attuned marketing strategies.

In conclusion, the study underscores a wider cultural transition in self-expression from mass-market, conspicuously branded fashion toward understated, invisible branding. This shift calls for further inquiry into self-expression through invisible branding, while signaling an increasing demand for ethical branding practices grounded in authenticity, personal style, and individuality, rather than mainstream trends.

Keywords: Consumer Culture Theory, Identity Construction, Invisible Brands, Self-Expression, Visible Brand Avoidance

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The invisibility is only invisible to those who cannot see. (2025)

This quote highly inspired us to make sure we strengthen our visibility, even in fields we might have thought to be invisible to us.

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1 Introduction

In contemporary society, it is commonly agreed that Consumer Culture exerts a profound influence on individual identity formation. This is nowhere more evident than in the realm of fashion consumption, where clothing functions not merely as a practical necessity but as a potent medium for self-expression. Existent literature in Consumer Culture Theory highlights how individuals strategically curate their outward appearance, leveraging material possessions to construct and project a desired persona that aligns with their social positioning and personal narrative (Arnould et al. 2023). Previous research within Consumer Culture Theory suggests the instrumental role of fashion and branding in identity construction, especially self-expression and social signaling, demonstrating that external observers infer an individual's social class, cultural capital, and underlying values based on sartorial choices. Hence, scholars often contend that fashion operates as a symbolic language, articulating facets of identity that go beyond inherent personal characteristics.

Closely allied with the mass media, the fashion system influences the ways in which we perceive and use our bodies; it also affects our conceptions of our personal and social identities... (González and Bovone, 2013, p.6).

Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self further elaborates on this dynamic, positing that individuals integrate possessions into their self-concept, thereby extending their identity through material goods, such as clothing. It is widely argued that, in particular visibly branded apparel, serves as a means of crafting and communicating a meticulously curated self-image, as well as self-expression. This aligns with the widely accepted assumption that individuals actively engage in self-presentation strategies, selectively adopting brands and styles that signal their group affiliations, aspirations, and socioeconomic status (Arnould et al. 2023). By situating themselves within specific social contexts, for example, through the endorsement of high-status luxury brands or the adherence to subcultural fashion codes, consumers leverage fashion as a powerful tool for social positioning.

Further scholarship in Consumer Culture Theory underscores the strategic ways in which individuals manage their outward appearance to navigate social hierarchies. Bourdieu's (1984) theory of social distinction emphasizes how markers of middle-class taste and cultural refinement function as symbolic resources through which individuals seek to align themselves with higher social class and distinguish themselves from those perceived as lower in the social hierarchy. Distinction was a pioneering contribution to the field of Consumer Culture Theory, providing a comprehensive account of how cultural markers, such as branded clothing, and forms of knowledge operate alongside economic factors in shaping the dynamics of social class relations. In more detail, it is commonly believed that clothes, as cultural signifiers, can

delineate one's place within the broader social order. This underscores the dual role of fashion as both an instrument of inclusion of a social class and a tool of differentiation. Fashion as a powerful tool in social contexts relates to the phenomenon of logomania, defined by the conspicuous display of brand logos on clothing, accessories, and lifestyle products (Poon, 2023). Logomania has also become deeply embedded in Contemporary Consumer Culture, functioning as an influential mechanism for the construction and expression of both individuality and collective identities within social hierarchy.

The popular expression "You are what you wear" or "Dress to impress" encapsulates the deeply entrenched cultural belief in fashion as a form of self-expression. A particularly compelling illustration of this phenomenon is found in the case of the globally recognized brand Harley-Davidson. Initially, members of the working class embraced Harley-Davidson culture by adopting highly visible branded leather jackets and accessories as part of a collective identity centered around the archetype of the American outlaw biker (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Over time, professionals within the Harley-Davidson community reappropriated the brand as a symbol of rebellion, although in a more ironic manner. Subsequently, women leveraged Harley-Davidson as a means of asserting a powerful female identity, utilizing the brand as a tool for gender transformation and expression of empowerment (Martin et al. 2006).

These cases illustrate not only the fluidity of brand meaning, but also the extent to which consumers actively imbue brands with personalized significance, incorporating them into their identity work. The Harley-Davidson example underscores how consumers play an active role in using, shaping and redefining a brand's identity, transforming it into a vehicle for self-expression and social belonging, visible for the public eye. These examples once again demonstrate that existing literature in Consumer Culture Theory predominantly examines identity formation through conspicuous brand affiliations (Arvidsson, 2005; Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

While substantial research in Consumer Culture Theory has explored how individuals utilize visibly branded fashion to format and express identity, relatively little attention has been given to the motives of those who deliberately avoid overt branding while still engaging in identity expression. However, a review of the existing literature on consumers who favour inconspicuous brands reveals notable tendencies, particularly within the luxury sector.

A lot of people no longer feel the need to distinguish themselves with a logo to show what tribe they belong to. They're ready to love clothes for other reasons: the quality, the style. (Williams, 2023)

Although logomania, the overrepresented display of brand logos on clothing, continues to exert a magnificent influence in fashion consumer behaviour, a shift towards subtle, understated logo-free clothing is evident on the market. Williams (2023) reports that even

within the outdoor gear segment, where flashy colours and prominent logos have traditionally attracted the average streetwear consumers through the "gorpcore" aesthetic, minimalist approaches have generated much greater attention than the logo-centric counterparts. The reduced emphasis on overt branding, which has extended into the high luxury sector, starts to transform both middle-class consumer behaviour and the ways in which fashion is utilized as a medium of self-expression.

This shift is driven not only by growing brand fatigue but also by an increasing consumer desire for authenticity. There is substantial evidence of a rising preference among consumers for genuine connections with more quiet brands. Findings from Siegel+Gale's *World's Simplest Brands* survey indicate that over 78% of respondents favor brands that communicate clearly and maintain a simple visual identity (BrandWagon Online, 2024). Furthermore, Boyaci (2023) explores the influential role of aesthetically oriented social platforms such as Instagram and TikTok in reinforcing this cultural transition. These platforms elevate personal style over explicit brand recognition, thereby contributing to the movement toward a more authentic-driven fashion style.

In an era of digital saturation, particularly among consumers who are more reflective about their perceptions of value, there is a growing appreciation for brands that convey distinct and coherent brand assets beyond overt logos or conspicuous branding (Gopinath, 2025). Through the reduction of visual noise, brands embrace minimalism, a trend that continues to gain traction. According to McKinsey's *Global Fashion Report*, 65% of respondents seeking luxury brands believe that understated design holds greater value than explicit brand recognition (Gopinath, 2025). This finding underscores the increasing importance of a design-driven, minimalist approach, suggesting that overt branding may be declining in relevance, at least when looking at consumers in the luxury department.

Despite this noticeable cultural shift in the luxury sector, there is a limited understanding of why middle-class consumers express themselves through these less visible, completely invisible or non-traditional branding strategies. Thus, an important gap remains in understanding the underlying motivations of these individuals to reject prominent branding and logomania. The middle class is defined as "a social group that consists of ordinary people who usually have good jobs and are neither rich nor very poor" (Cambridge University Press, 2024). While this definition is simplified, it captures the essence of the demographic explored in this study: individuals with secure but non-elite economic standing and the symbolic and cultural capital to engage in identity expression through fashion (Bourdieu, 1984; Moawad & Oesch, 2024). If existing theory emphasizes identity construction through overt markers, a conclusion would be that consumers avoiding visible brands either do not express themselves at all, or they have different ways and underlying motives of doing it. Therefore, we want to investigate what motivations middle-class consumers have to choose invisibly branded clothing as a means of self-expression. Why do they avoid overt branding, and what values or

beliefs underlie this decision? Might their self-representation be articulated through more subtle means; qualities that may not be immediately noticeable to the public eye? Investigating these inquiries aims to provide a richer understanding of the evolving relationship between consumer culture and self-expression, particularly in an era where the significance of visible branding is increasingly contested.

In the following, the aim and purpose of this study, including our research question, will be explained. Delimitations and a broad outline of the thesis will follow. In the methodology section, research approach and design will lead to the chosen data collection method, discussing data analysis, validity, reliability, the study's limitations, as well as ethical considerations. Furthermore, in the chapter of analysis, we will analyze the findings before concluding the study discussing the results, debating research aims, providing the research question answer, objectives, possible practical implications, as well as views on further research.

1.1 Aim and Purpose

In this research, we aim to question whether current frameworks of Consumer Culture Theory on identity expression through branding adequately consider alternative perspectives. According to Du Gay et al. (1997), a consumer's identity is described as an actively, constantly ongoing process directed by consumers themselves and marketers. As Goffman (1959) claims, consumers even consciously perform their identity in social contexts in order to create and show off a certain image of themselves for others. Belk's (1988) concept of the extended self highlights that consumers do use materialism and possessions as an instrument to extend their identity beyond their core self. This concept is built on the assumption that symbolic meanings can move from shared traditions, values, beliefs and norms to products, providing meaning for the consumer (McCracken, 1986). In relation to that, Belk et al. (2003) emphasized how individuals find themselves in constant desire to form a new self; a goal that is heavenly driven by global capitalism.

In this context, a new focus is laid not only on consumption itself, but also lifestyle elements that are used as identity expression tools. Such elements can be consumption subcultures (Kozinets 2001; Schouten & McAlexander 1995), advertising, (Mick & Buhl 1992) and - most importantly for this study - visible brands (Fournier 1998; Holt 2004). Consumer Culture Theory claims that this is why brands use social and cultural interferences to identify captivating dominant myths and cultural tensions that are relevant for consumers' identity expression. Holt (2004) states that, after having found relevant elements, brands seek to use these to evolve effective marketing communications that resonate with the consumer's mind set. As a consequence, visible brands enable consumers to associate themselves with a brand's mythologies, for example feminism, masculinity or independence, using detectable brands as effective instruments to express themselves. While the acceptance that obvious brands play a

crucial part in identity expression is widely established in Consumer Culture Theory, little attention has been paid to consumers, emerging from the middle-class sector, using invisibly branded items to express a certain sense of self, especially when looking at the realm of fashion.

Consequently, this study's overarching aim is to generate new understandings of what motives middle-class consumers have to express themselves in the context of invisible or non-traditional branding strategies. Previous scholarship has almost explicitly focused on the luxury segment, which is why this study is looking at the less affluent consumers belonging to the middle class. In this area of consumption, it remains unclear whether additional theoretical lenses are required to fully capture the motivations of these individuals who engage with invisibly branded fashion.

This study's purpose is to contribute to a more profound and intricate understanding of Consumer Culture Theory, consumer identity expression, and consumer's motivations for invisibly branded fashion consumption. Findings can provide theoretical contributions by gaining a deeper understanding of ways of expressing oneself, consumer behaviour and cultural dynamics. Additionally, managerial contributions may be gained through new-found strategic insights for marketers on positioning and emphasizing the intrinsic values of invisible brands to enhance customer loyalty. This study may also offer valuable comprehension of the development of advertising strategies and product offerings tailored to niche markets that prioritize discretion and subtlety. By understanding the narratives and identity-related motivations of middle-class consumers who gravitate toward silent, invisible brand experiences, marketers can more effectively craft communication strategies that resonate with this emerging consumer segment.

Moreover, outcomes may also contribute to higher consumer education. Findings could also aid consumers in making informed decisions by highlighting the social and personal benefits of engaging with invisible brands. Furthermore, the research outcome may suggest policy implications for supporting market diversity by encouraging ethical, more sustainable branding practices focused on authenticity rather than mass appeal. To conclude, these contributions can enrich not only the existing literature but also provide practical implications for both marketers and consumers, ultimately adding onto the understanding of consumer expression dynamics on the non-branded market.

Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to address the following research question:

What are motives for middle-class consumers to express themselves through invisibly branded clothing?

By exploring this generally overlooked gap of consumer identity expression, this research seeks to enhance the academic discussion on the motivations behind the consumption of

fashion items where traditional branding cues are absent or intentionally muted in the middle class sector.

1.2 Delimitations

This study is subject to several delimitations. Firstly, we employed a qualitative analysis of interviews to examine why individuals express their identities through invisible branding. The qualitative approach allows us to focus on how individuals construct meaning and interpret their reality through personal experiences and stories. The selection of this analytical approach emphasizes individual behaviour, but inherently limits the generalizability of findings to a broader population. Instead, insights derived from this study can be transferred to a more general level through higher abstraction.

Furthermore, the sample size of twenty participants used for the interviews is not sufficiently large to serve as a representative basis for broader generalization. While participants exhibit demographic diversity, the geographical distribution is limited, with a predominant representation of Western Culture. Consequently, this study does not provide a comprehensive international perspective on the topic of research.

While Consumer Culture Theory encompasses a broad spectrum of consumption practices, including but not limited to technology, food, and leisure, this study deliberately restricts its scope to fashion consumption. This delimitation is both strategic and theoretically justified. Fashion, as a domain of daily embodied practice, offers a uniquely visible and symbolically saturated site through which identity is expressed, negotiated, and perceived. Unlike other consumption forms that may be private or situational, clothing operates as a public-facing medium. By focusing exclusively on fashion, we are able to achieve the analytical specificity and interpretive depth required to investigate the subtleties of visible brand avoidance. Expanding the inquiry to additional categories, while possible, would risk diluting the conceptual clarity and methodological coherence necessary for addressing our research question within the given temporal and practical constraints.

To conclude, this research does not seek to offer a universal or conclusive answer to the research question, nor does it aim to fully bridge the existing research gap. Rather, the objective is to generate new insights that offer a novel perspective on middle-class consumer's identity expression through invisible brands while actively avoiding branded prominence. Subsequently, this new perspective challenges existent literature, especially emerging from Consumer Culture Theory.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into five chapters, each addressing a key aspect of the research. The following provides an overview of the content that is covered in each chapter.

The first chapter of this study, called Introduction, introduces the reader to the research topic by outlining the found research gap, followed by the aim and purpose that this study pursues to achieve, stating this study's research question. Furthermore, the subchapter of the delimitations provides the reader with a clear understanding of the researcher's active choices made in terms of what the research aims to find and include.

The second chapter, Literature Review, explores relevant literature, in total four streams, to the study's topic and theoretical frameworks related to Consumer Culture Theory. It contains a critical review of traditional concepts of identity expression and symbolic branding by identifying and highlighting the literature gap of this research. This chapter is crucial as it questions assumptions in existent literature and therefore establishes the foundation of this study.

The Methodology chapter describes the research approach and design, as well as the chosen data collection method. Additionally, the data analysis is explained, followed by a reflection on the study's validity and reliability. Limitations of the research approach are discussed and a brief chapter summary is provided.

The fourth chapter, Data Analysis, presents an in-depth examination of the interview data, highlighting the key themes, patterns, and underlying motivations that emerged from participants' narratives. This chapter forms the empirical core of the study, translating raw insights into meaningful findings that inform the overall argument.

Lastly, the conclusion chapter contains the discussion of the findings in relation to the research objectives and existing literature, using a relevant figure to visually summarize the main outcomes. It explores the implications of the results, addresses potential limitations, and provides insights into their broader significance. Additionally, it summarizes the research's key findings by answering the research question, discusses contributions to the field of Consumer Culture Theory and traditional literature on identity expression, as well as a suggestion of areas for future research. It also reflects on the practical implications of the study and its limitations. To conclude, this study's structured approach ensures a logical progression of ideas for the reader and a clear presentation of the research findings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Identity Construction through Consumption

Since the term *Identity* is widely used throughout this paper, and conceptions of what it means may differ from reader to reader, we define it as: *The process through which consumers actively shape and express their sense of self by selecting and negotiating among a variety of culturally established meanings and alternatives* (Arnould & Thompson, 2023). It involves aligning personal conceptions of the self with socially constructed symbols, norms, and values in an effort to create a coherent and meaningful narrative of who one is. Providing a well-established framework, Consumer Culture Theory highlights that individuals construct their identities in relation to others throughout their lives, using possessions and brands as symbolic tools for self-expression and social positioning (Arnould & Thompson, 2023; Belk, 1988; Holt, 2004). As Belk (1988, p.160) notes, “possessions contribute to sense of self,” and it seems “an inescapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions” (p.160), suggesting that material goods are not merely functional objects, but are deeply embedded in the construction and performance of our identity and an *Extension of the Self*.

Goffman (1959) adds another layer to this dynamic process of identity formation through a dramaturgical perspective, suggesting that we merely perform who we want to be and are actors in our everyday life. Through consumption, we manage impressions and present curated versions of ourselves depending on the context and act we find ourselves in. From this perspective, identity is not simply discovered, but actively performed and reconstructed through the symbols one chooses to display or conceal. Recent studies additionally emphasize that identity signaling is deeply relational and context dependent. For example, Wang and Griskevicius (2014) demonstrate that luxury consumption among women often serves as a relational signal directed not at men, but at other women, to assert exclusivity and guarding relational territory. These findings highlight that identity construction through consumption extends beyond personal expression to include audience-specific impression management rooted in complex social dynamics.

Postmodern perspectives further complicate this picture by framing identity as fluid, fragmented, and shaped through the ongoing consumption of cultural meanings (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Kozinets, 2001). Particularly in hedonic domains such as fashion, consumers experiment with multiple self-images, often adopting, modifying, or rejecting products and styles in ways that reflect their shifting roles and values (Arnould et al. 2003; Celsi et al. 1993). Scaraboto and Fischer’s (2013) study of the Fashionista community reinforces the idea that identity work is not limited to conformity with mainstream ideals, but

instead, it can emerge from acts of resistance, reinterpretation, and collective value-making. Their findings underscore that identity is constructed not only through what consumers choose to display, but also through the norms they challenge and the symbolic spaces they inhabit. Taken together, these perspectives establish that consumer identity is dynamic, negotiated, and deeply embedded in social, cultural, and material contexts.

While much existing literature focuses on branded consumption as a symbolic act, our study extends the conversation by showing that even in the absence of visible branding, consumers still actively construct and communicate their identity. Specifically, our findings show that middle-class consumers use invisibly branded fashion to express maturity, confidence, and autonomy in identity formation. This broadens Consumer Culture Theory by introducing subtle, logo-free fashion as a new medium of symbolic self-expression, not previously emphasized in identity construction literature.

2.2 Conspicuous Consumption and Social Distinction

As discussed in the previous section, identity is not a static structure, but rather a fluid and socially contested process impacted by cultural, relational, and substantial influences. While consumption more broadly enables individuals to symbolically express and perform identity, brands act as especially potent tools in this practice. Not only do they serve merely as commercial markers, but also as carriers of cultural meaning. Consumers use them as resources to signal who they are, what they value, and how they wish to be perceived by others. Branding, therefore, operates at the intersection of personal identity work and collective systems of social classification.

This relationship is best explained by Bourdieu's (1984) theory of *Distinction*, which proposes that taste is never purely personal, but rather a product of one's social position and environment. Individuals develop class-based dispositions, known as *Habitus*, which guide their preferences and consumption choices, ultimately affecting how they interact with cultural goods, including brands. Individuals with high cultural capital are more likely to exhibit tastes that are subtle, or aesthetically demanding, thereby distinguishing themselves from others who rely on more immediately legible signals of value (Bourdieu, 1984). In this context, brands become a medium for social positioning, reinforcing social class differences, with certain brands or brand aesthetics serving as indicators of refined taste, often recognizable only to those in the know.

Laying the groundwork for Bourdieu's influential theory, several decades earlier, Thorstein Veblen (1925) introduced the concept of *Conspicuous Consumption* to describe how elites display wealth through visibly wasteful goods and behaviours, not out of necessity or efficiency, but to assert social superiority. In his view, such consumption serves two key functions: it signals a person's exemption from productive labour (leisure), and it participates in invidious comparison, where status is gained by being seen as above others. Central to this

is the idea of *Pecuniary Emulation*, which entails consumers mimicking the behaviours of higher-status groups in order to climb the social ladder. Branding, under this lens, becomes a performative tool through which individuals mark themselves as affluent, tasteful, or culturally superior.

Although written over a century ago, Veblen's theory remains highly influential in contemporary society. As Edgell (1999, p. 116) points out, "consumption has social and cultural significance far beyond mere finance." Today, branding choices are rarely neutral; they often convey messages about class, values, and lifestyle. While Veblen centered his analysis on overt displays of wealth, such as lavish fashion or visibly luxurious goods, contemporary forms of distinction have evolved. Bourdieu (1984) advanced this conversation by showing how social stratification now operates through more nuanced, often unconscious preferences. Whereas Veblen's elite signal status through visibility, Bourdieu's upper class communicates distinction through restraint, authenticity, and cultural sophistication.

The shift away from conspicuousness toward symbolic complexity has substantial consequences for contemporary research. As Currid-Halkett (2024) argues, members of the "aspirational class" increasingly differentiate themselves not via evident luxury, but through *Inconspicuous Consumption*. Practices such as wearing sustainable clothing, choosing boutique education, or buying organic produce may appear modest, yet they carry strong moral and cultural connotations. This form of consumption is no less strategic than Veblen's conspicuous displays, as it simply is coded differently, and accessible only to those who possess the cultural capital to decode it. In this way, Bourdieu's concept of *Distinction* remains highly relevant, explaining how even understated consumption communicates identity and reinforces social boundaries.

At the same time, not all brand choices are driven solely by status or class signaling. Campbell (2021) challenges this assumption by proposing the idea of imaginative hedonism, suggesting that consumers often seek emotional expression, fantasy, or self-realization through the goods they consume. Nonetheless, as Pignatola (2025) emphasizes, even these seemingly personal or introspective choices are socially embedded and shaped by shared meanings, peer expectations, and symbolic structures. From visible luxury to minimalist design, branding remains central to how individuals perform, negotiate, and reinforce identity in relation to others. This makes this study on invisible brands particularly relevant as it aims to offer insight into how identity is constructed and expressed not only through what is seen, but through what is recognized, interpreted, and understood by those who are culturally equipped to do so.

Building on the foundational insights of Bourdieu and Veblen, our research challenges the traditional view that conspicuous consumption is inherently tied to visible branding or overt luxury. We show that middle-class consumers, too, engage in practices of distinction through quiet markers such as fabric quality, tailoring precision, and design subtlety. In doing so, we

contest the prevailing notion that inconspicuous signaling is the exclusive domain of the elite, arguing instead that middle-class individuals mobilize symbolic capital in deliberately silent ways. This reframing invites a broader reconsideration of how status and distinction are enacted in contemporary consumer cultures.

2.3 Logos as Tools of Symbolism

While the preceding section investigated how brands work as tools for identity building and social differentiation, it is just as crucial to analyze how these functions are executed through symbolic mechanisms. A brand's meaning is transmitted not just through product function, but also through a system of cues (visual, linguistic, and material) that consumers interpret and respond to (Liang & Cheong, 2025). Among these, the logo is very prominent. In addition to communicating the brand's identity, it serves as a visual symbol of its social and cultural values. As previously mentioned, nowadays, the process of identity construction is deeply interlinked with branding strategies. To better understand how customers navigate the symbolic qualities of branding, the next section examines the role of logos, symbols and other visual elements as strategic tools in identity performance.

The symbolic dimension of branding owes much to the early work of Sidney Levy (1959), whose article “Symbols for Sale” coined the theory of *Symbolism* and remains foundational in consumer research until today. He argued that products are not valued solely for their utility, but for the meanings they carry, shaped by cultural context and individual identity. As he put it, “people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (Levy, 1959, p. 118). In this view, consumption is inherently symbolic, and brands serve as vehicles through which individuals express values, construct identities, and signal social belonging.

Expanding on the understanding of how symbolic brand meaning operates over time, does Fournier's (1998) conceptualization of *Brands as Relationship Partners*. According to her, consumers do not only engage with brands in purely transactional ways, they also form enduring attachments, emotional bonds, and even personal narratives around them. Through repeated interaction, a brand becomes a symbolic anchor for experiences and self-understanding. Its logo, slogan, or packaging may evoke entire chapters of a consumer's life, acting as a cue for personal history, identity goals, or aspirational selves (Fournier, 1988). These brand relationships are often deeply personal, yet socially mediated, and their symbolic weight is often visually expressed through branding elements like logos.

At the heart of these symbolic systems lies the logo. Logos serve as immediately recognizable signs that communicate not just brand identity, but also what that identity represents socially and culturally (Wang, 2023). According to Ting et al. (2017), consumer preferences for brands are significantly shaped by the visibility, placement, and prominence of logos, especially in the fashion sector. Their findings suggest that powerful, high-status brands benefit from

discreet logo use, while lesser-known brands require louder visual presence to gain recognition. This distinction supports a broader pattern in symbolic consumption: the more culturally entrenched a brand is, the less it needs to assert itself overtly.

This aligns closely with findings by Han et al. (2010), who introduced the concept of *Brand Prominence* to explain how logo visibility functions as a form of social signaling. High-status consumers, they argue, tend to prefer subtle or even invisible branding, allowing them to communicate their identity only to those who share similar levels of cultural capital. In this way, logos act as boundary markers, not just of aesthetic style, but of social belonging and the idea of *Exclusivity*. Those who recognize the discreet logo on a minimalist tote or a muted sneaker understand the status being signaled, while others remain unaware.

These symbolic processes extend into the personal realm. As Kirmani (2009), Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) suggest, consumers engage with brands not just to gain status, but to manage how they see themselves and how they are perceived by others. Branding elements, including logos, help individuals reflect their actual self, signal their ideal self, or negotiate belonging within aspirational social groups. Additionally, consumers use brands to affiliate with or distance themselves from reference groups, meaning that logos are not only reflective, but also performative tools in social identity construction (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Grace & O'Cass, 2002).

Since the late 20th century, displaying luxury and wealth through logos has increased so exponentially that the term *Logomania* has evolved to describe this trend of using large, visible logos as overt signals of brand affiliation and social status (Pólo dos Santos & Salomão Ribas Gomez, 2010; Dealca et al. 2022). Within the luxury sector, logos have transcended their original role as indicators of product quality or origin, becoming potent visual symbols of aspiration, prestige, and emotional connection. The visible presence of a logo on clothing, accessories, or other luxury goods, also referred to as *Loud Luxury*, functions not merely as a brand identifier but as a strategic device for affirming one's position within aspirational social hierarchies (Bagheri, 2014). As Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2003) emphasize, logos in the context of luxury serve as concrete manifestations of added symbolic value, fostering immediate brand recognition and cultivating a sense of intimacy, familiarity, and even humanity between consumers and brands. Through their widespread application across communication channels and product design, logos act as accessible yet powerful tools for expressing affiliation, cultural belonging, and personal distinction. In this dynamic, logomania represents not just a stylistic trend but a deliberate amplification of branding as a means of performing identity, allowing consumers to visibly inscribe themselves into desirable cultural narratives.

Contrary to prevailing assumptions that logos function as indispensable instruments of symbolic expression and foster deep emotional brand ties (cf. Levy; Fournier), our findings reveal a more ambivalent dynamic. For some consumers, logos are not enablers but

constraints of identity, which are perceived as intrusive impositions that distort rather than reflect the self. Participants in our study consciously distanced themselves from branded iconography, seeking instead to preserve authenticity and exert agency over how they are socially read. We therefore problematize the notion that logos naturally amplify identity expression, proposing instead that their deliberate absence can operate as a counter-symbol, communicating independence, restraint, and a commitment to personal coherence in a logo-saturated cultural landscape.

2.4 Invisible Brands and Brand Avoidance

On the opposing realm of Loud Luxury, recent trends have shown a move towards *Quiet Luxury*, where consumers deliberately engage with brands that minimize or eliminate overt logo displays, favoring more discreet forms of brand signaling (Taylor et al. 2025; Bagheri, 2014; Halwani, 2021). The preference for quiet luxury does not imply a detachment from social signaling. Rather, it represents a strategic shift toward subtler forms of distinction. Taylor et al. (2025) demonstrate that consumers who prefer no-logo luxury goods are often motivated by a desire for social connectedness with a culturally fluent elite rather than mass admiration. This aligns with Han et al.'s (2010) earlier findings that high-status individuals with low need for conspicuousness prefer subtle brand cues that are legible solely to those with similar cultural capital. While luxury brands announce identity, invisible brands may whisper it. In this context, *Invisible Brands*, defined here as a brand's piece of clothing that does not display any visible logo or brand marker, have gained increasing relevance among consumers who deliberately avoid noticeable symbols in their everyday fashion choices and act as boundary indicator, delineating insiders from outsiders without relying on ostentatious displays.

Building on this shift, the growing appeal of invisible brands can be closely linked to the simultaneous rise of *Consumer Minimalism*, a broader cultural movement that redefines how possessions and identity interact. Consumer minimalism, as Wilson and Bellezza (2022) explain, is not simply the act of reducing one's possessions; rather, it embodies a deliberate philosophy, where individuals embrace sparse aesthetics, prioritize intentional consumption, and seek to align purchasing behaviour closely with deeply held personal values. In this evolving landscape, minimalist consumers do not abandon the symbolic power of consumption altogether. Instead, they transform it, shifting their focus from external validation to expressions of identity that seek coherence, authenticity, and meaning, often noticeable only to those sharing comparable cultural capital (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022).

Yet, the critique of logo-centric branding is not new. Few authors have captured the cultural consequences of branding saturation as incisively as Naomi Klein (2000) in her influential work *No Logo*. She argues that brands have shifted from merely representing products to embedding themselves in the very fabric of culture, seeking to shape lifestyles, values, and

personal identities. She describes how corporations attempt to saturate public spaces, personal choices, and even political discourse, turning branding into a pervasive force in everyday life. As she powerfully notes,

Over the past decade and a half, logos have grown so dominant that they have essentially transformed the clothing on which they appear into empty carriers for the brands they represent. (Klein, 2000, p.35)

Within this context, the rejection of visible branding is not solely an aesthetic preference but a conscious act of resistance against the corporate colonization of identity.

Klein's work is crucial for understanding the contemporary rejection of visible branding, as she captures not only the omnipresence of logos but also the growing discontent that such saturation provokes. She documents how consumers increasingly perceive overt branding as an invasive force, one that seeks to colonize personal spaces, cultural institutions, and even political movements. This invasion blurs the boundary between private self-expression and corporate marketing agendas, leading to an erosion of authentic identity work. As Klein (2000) notes, the backlash against corporate branding is not merely aesthetic but deeply political, rooted in a desire to reclaim cultural space from commercial exploitation.

While this critique captures the broader cultural and societal resistance to overt branding, consumer behaviour research further reveals that this rejection often manifests through intentional brand avoidance strategies, where individuals actively distance themselves from brands that conflict with their personal or ethical identities. *Brand Avoidance*, as conceptualized by Lee et al. (2009), reflects a deliberate consumer strategy aimed at disengaging from brands that are perceived as incongruent with one's identity, values, or ethical beliefs. Several drivers of brand avoidance, including symbolic incongruity, ideological opposition, and moral concerns, suggest that avoidance is often less about dissatisfaction with product performance and more about rejecting what the brand culturally represents (Lee et al. 2009; Pangakar et al. 2021). Within this broader framework, the turn toward invisible brands can be understood as a proactive identity management strategy, where individuals seek to assert autonomy and distance themselves from the homogenizing narratives of mass-market branding.

While earlier scholarship on brand avoidance has predominantly cast it as a form of political or ethical resistance, our findings reveal a more layered and less overtly ideological rationale. Participants seldom rejected visible branding due to activist intentions, but more due to a desire to preserve authenticity and avoid misperception from others. This is why we introduce the concept of *Visible Brand Avoidance*, which captures identity linked with aesthetically motivated logo aversion, distinct from overall brand avoidance. As a result, we broaden existing discourse to account not only for luxury consumers, but also middle-class individuals who navigate branding in more subtle and socially embedded ways.

2.5 Chapter Summary

Taken together, and drawing from the foundational pillars of Consumer Culture Theory as well as identity construction theories proposed by Belk and Goffman, it becomes increasingly evident that individuals, especially in the realm of fashion, engage in consumption not merely to express who they are, but to signal social status, belonging, and alignment with broader cultural narratives. Clothing brands, in turn, capitalize on this symbolic function by deploying visible logos as identity markers, reinforcing Bourdieu's notion of social and cultural capital, and echoing Veblen's century-old thesis of conspicuous consumption.

Yet, while the loud aesthetics of logomania and the spectacle of overt luxury have long defined mainstream status signaling, recent shifts in consumer behaviour point to an emerging countermovement: quiet luxury and invisible branding. This evolution reflects more than a stylistic preference for minimalism, as it signals a deeper shift from broad public visibility toward selective recognition within culturally attuned social groups. Consumers who deliberately avoid visible branding appear to resist dominant corporate scripts that equate personal meaning with commercial visibility. By embracing invisible brands, they may be engaging in strategic acts of identity construction centered on authenticity, ethical alignment, and insider recognition.

Despite these notable developments, the underlying motivations behind such choices remain only partially understood. Although existing scholarship offers rich insights into quiet luxury, brand avoidance, and anti-logo preferences, this literature remains confined to affluent, high-cultural-capital consumers operating within the luxury segment (Han et al. 2010; Taylor et al. 2025; Bagheri, 2013). These studies convincingly show that subtle branding can act as an insider signal, a code legible only to the culturally rich. In contrast, overt logos are often associated with lower cultural capital and the desire for outward recognition. However, what remains largely unexamined is how such branding dynamics unfold among everyday middle-class consumers, who may not possess elite cultural capital, but demonstrate symbolic awareness through informed choices regarding cut, fabric, and style minimalism. The symbolic behaviours of these consumers, even though quieter in display, are no less meaningful.

While we anticipate our findings to support aspects of existing literature, we also propose that middle-class consumers are not abandoning brands and their power altogether, but rather transforming the way they interact with them. This shift points toward a broader reconfiguration of consumer-brand relationships. Instead of engaging in overt or conspicuous self-signaling through logos, we expect to observe more subtle and strategic forms of identity expression, shaped by distinct personal and social motivations.

Contrary to earlier scholarship that tends to associate middle-class consumers with a reliance on visible branding for identity construction and social belonging, our study seeks to

demonstrate that those who deliberately avoid overt logos are nonetheless actively participating in these symbolic processes, but through different, less visible mechanisms. Rather than embracing total brand avoidance, these consumers appear to reject the loud and highly visible expressions of branding, while still engaging with brand meaning in ways that reflect their evolving values, self-perceptions, and their ability to navigate emerging aesthetic codes.

By examining the identity-related motivations behind logo avoidance, our study sheds light on why middle-class consumers engage in symbolic consumption not through conspicuous branding, but through subtle cues such as fabric quality, tailoring, and brand anonymity. This challenges the prevailing emphasis in branding literature on logo-centric, luxury-driven forms of identity expression, which often overlook middle-class practices and aesthetic preferences. In doing so, we address a gap in Consumer Culture Theory by showing that symbolic consumption is not limited to elite or activist consumers, but also occurs among everyday individuals who seek recognition, authenticity, and distinction through quieter, less visible forms of branding. Our findings reframe symbolic consumption as an increasingly complex practice in which invisibility becomes a tool for controlled visibility, therefore a way of being seen by the right audience without resorting to extravaganza.

3 Methodology

This methodology section presents the qualitative study and the inductive research approach adopted for this study's analysis. It provides a detailed account of the data collection process through interviews, describes the analytical procedures employed, and addresses the study's data analysis, its validity and reliability, as well as the limitations that come with it.

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore which motives middle-class consumers have to express themselves through invisible branding. A qualitative strategy was chosen for this research as it seeks to understand the meanings, experiences, and motivations behind participants' behaviours; an area not easily quantifiable. Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, this research assumes that reality is socially constructed and subjective, which aligns with the goal of uncovering individual motives and perspectives. The study follows an inductive reasoning process, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the primary data rather than testing a pre-existing hypothesis (Heit, 2000). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives and motivations, which enhances the richness and transferability of the findings (Dearnley, 2005). This approach is particularly appropriate given the subjective and context-dependent nature of individual self-expression through invisible branding. The selected methodology aligns with the research objectives, which prioritize depth of understanding over generalizability, a conclusion dominantly made in quantitative studies with a positivist paradigm (Park et al. 2020).

3.2 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design based on social constructionism, which views identity as a product of cultural relationships, symbols, and consuming behaviours rather than a fixed property (Burr, 2015). This phenomenological and symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes that people actively generate meaning in their social contexts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Rather than being understood as something objectively measurable, identity is viewed as flexible and constantly negotiated and expressed by human decisions, including fashion purchases (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Thus, a qualitative method was used because self-expression is a very subjective and personal process that cannot be fully portrayed using numerical data or conventional metrics. Fashion decisions are complicated, including social and psychological components that are best understood through detailed narratives and personal reflections rather than rigid categories. Hence, this method enables participants to explain their experiences in their own words, revealing symbolic meanings and reasons that drive their fashion choices, leading to expressing their sense of self.

Taking an interpretivist epistemological approach, this study assumes that knowledge is subjective and socially constructed rather than being independently of human perception (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). From this perspective, clothing selections are a type of communication, allowing people to express and shape their identities in various social and cultural contexts. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011, p. 45), "constructionism emphasizes the role of humans in actively using symbolic resources to objectify, circulate, and interpret the meaningfulness of their environments and their existence." This is consistent with the study's goal of investigating why people interact with invisibly branded apparel to express personal identity. Unlike positivism, social constructionism recognizes that the expression of self is fluent, shaped by encounters and ever-changing cultural narratives. Fashion, according to this viewpoint, is more than just a consumer decision; it is also a symbolic tool for identity negotiation and self-expression.

Because this is an exploratory and inductive study, the design is flexible and adaptive, allowing themes to arise naturally throughout the data collection and analysis. Since there is little research on middle-class consumer's motives for self-expression through invisibly branded fashion, taking an open-ended approach allows for new discoveries to emerge rather than constraining the study to established hypotheses. This study does not strive to establish universal truths, but rather to provide detailed, context-specific insights into how people experience and express themselves through fashion choices. The emphasis on depth over breadth guarantees that individual motives are thoroughly explored, exposing nuances and complexities that a large-scale quantitative study may miss. This is consistent with qualitative approaches that emphasize symbolic meaning-making and personal storytelling, acknowledging that self-expression is a highly subjective, culturally rooted, and ever-changing process.

3.3 Data Collection Method

3.3.1 Interviews

For the purpose of this research, twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' motives toward fashion choices, expression of self, and branding. This method provides a structured, yet flexible framework for exploring key themes, while simultaneously allowing participants the freedom to articulate their perspectives in their own terms (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between fully structured interviews, which may constrain responses to predefined questions, and unstructured conversations, which risk to easily deviate from the research focus. This format enables the introduction of unanticipated viewpoints and facilitates dynamic dialogue guided by, but not limited to, a set of predetermined topics. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via online video calls, with each session lasting

around 30 minutes. This duration allowed for rich, naturalistic conversations while maintaining participant engagement.

The interview protocol, attached in Appendix B, was designed to encourage reflective discussions on participants' clothing decisions, the significance of invisible branding in self-expression, and the broader relationship between clothing and self formation. While broad, open-ended prompts were used to initiate dialogue, the format remained sufficiently flexible to accommodate spontaneous narratives, personal reflections, and emergent themes not initially expected. This approach also fostered an informal, conversational atmosphere, which helped participants feel comfortable when discussing personal views on expressing oneself through invisible brands. Moreover, given the inherently subjective nature of individual expression, it was essential to provide participants with the opportunity to describe their clothing choices in their very own words. This approach aligns with the study's interpretivist paradigm, which contends that knowledge is socially constructed through individual experiences and cultural contexts (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

To conclude, this research adopts a qualitative, constructionist perspective, which emphasizes the context-specific exploration of meaning-making processes over statistical generalization. In this case, twenty interviews facilitated the initial identification of recurring patterns, which were subsequently explored through a qualitative analysis.

3.3.2 Sample Selection

For this research, a combination of purposive and convenience sampling was employed to ensure both accessibility to participants and the selection of individuals with direct relevance to the research objectives (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In line with the principles of purposive sampling, clear inclusion criteria were established, focusing specifically on individuals who are actively engaged in fashion consumption while deliberately avoiding overt branding. By targeting participants who consciously reject visible logos and other prominent brand identifiers as components of their personal style, the study ensured that the sample aligned closely with the research focus and could offer meaningful insights into the underlying motivations associated with this choice of fashion consumption.

In practical terms, participants were recruited through a two-sided approach. Initially, individuals from our personal and professional networks were selected to meet the predefined inclusion criteria. This method allowed for an initial degree of control over the recruitment process, as it enabled a preliminary assessment of potential participants' suitability for the study, particularly their alignment with the consumer behaviour in question.

To complement this initial strategy and reduce the potential for sampling bias associated with reliance on familiar individuals, additional participants were recruited through social media platforms. Recruitment announcements, referred to as "shout-outs," were posted on our Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn accounts, specifically targeting individuals who identified

with the described consumption pattern. This outreach was expanded as our network reposted our appeal, which enabled the inclusion of participants who were previously unknown to us, thereby enhancing the diversity of the sample and contributing to a more robust and credible dataset. This dual recruitment strategy was employed to achieve a balance between accessibility and diversity, ultimately contributing to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research by minimizing potential interviewer bias. In total, twenty participants from eight different countries were recruited.

To capture a broader range of perspectives, participants with differing educational backgrounds, all emerging from the middle-class, were included. We collected insights from a diverse cohort comprising university students, young adults at the onset of their professional careers, and participants ranging in age from 40 to 60 years, offering perspectives shaped by a greater degree of life experience. This range allowed us to gain perspectives from both younger and more experienced individuals in life. The variation in age and educational background also enabled us to capture differences in financial resources related to fashion consumption. Additionally, participants' various nationalities, while emerging from Western Culture, enriched the discussion surrounding invisibly branded fashion and allowed for more nuanced interpretations of participants' motivations as well as cultural variations of fashion consumption.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure fidelity to the participants' narratives. This approach ensured that participants' voices remained central throughout the analysis and interpretation phases of this study.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative analysis of interview data to investigate the underlying motivations behind individuals' self-expression through invisible brands. Recognizing that fashion choices often function as symbolic markers of identity, a construct that is both complex and deeply personal, a qualitative, in-depth methodological approach is particularly well-suited to this inquiry. Such an approach facilitates the exploration of individual narratives, which may take various forms. Thus, this analytical framework allows for a comprehensive examination of why middle-class consumers engage with invisible brands to express aspects of identity, whether through deliberate intention or unconscious expression.

3.4.1 Coding through Motives

Given that the interviews evoked individual motives from each participant, we adopted a systematic approach to data by identifying recurring themes and patterns across the dataset. For this purpose, coding tables were developed, outlining four primary motives along with

associated sub-themes that were most prominent in participants' responses. The identification and interpretation of these themes for each interview support a logical and coherent analysis, allowing individual insights to be contextualized within broader, collectively emerging patterns.

In developing the coding system, it became evident that coding should not be established prior to analysis, but rather viewed as an iterative and evolving process requiring ongoing refinement (Weston et al. 2001). The construction of a coding framework is inherently shaped by a shared understanding of emerging themes and patterns among the researchers. As such, qualitative analysis is susceptible to researcher bias, given that the identification of codes and themes depends on the researchers' judgment and is influenced by their assumptions (Weston et al. 2001). To minimize such bias, we independently identified emergent themes within the interview data before comparing and discussing our interpretations to reach a consensus on emerging dominant patterns. This approach allowed both of us to form initial interpretations without being influenced by the perspectives of the respective other. Additionally, we consulted with our supervisor regarding the coding framework to ensure that it was not unduly shaped by individual preconceptions or biases. Nonetheless, the potential for misinterpretation of qualitative data remains, and thus, the findings of this study are subject to limitations in internal validity.

3.4.2 Visual Representation of our findings

To further ensure a structured and logically coherent presentation of the findings that emerged from our analysis, we decided to develop a mind map, included in Chapter 5, that visually organizes the four main motives identified through the coding process. This mind map serves as a conceptual framework, within which we integrate relevant existing literature by associating it with the respective motivations, thereby forming thematic clusters. This methodological approach enabled us to systematically connect empirical insights with theoretical perspectives, allowing the development of a cohesive and analytically grounded written account (Buzan & Buzan, 2006). Through this process, we were able to highlight and examine the key elements most relevant to our research question more effectively, thus reinforcing the academic rigor and interpretive depth of our analysis.

3.5 Credibility and Reliability

To ensure the trustworthiness of this research, several measures were implemented to guarantee that the interview's interpretations accurately represent participants' experiences and perspectives.

3.5.1 Credibility

Reflecting the study's interpretive epistemological stance, we acknowledged our active role in shaping the research outcome. To uphold reflexivity, regular internal journaling was undertaken to identify and mitigate potential personal biases and assumptions, thereby supporting continuous improvement throughout the research process. In particular, during the interviews, deliberate strategies were employed, such as allowing silence to enable participants reflection and emphasizing "why" and "how" questions to generate deeper, more meaningful insights. Furthermore, we aimed to construct vivid mental images by initiating questions with concrete examples, thereby easing participants into the topics and promoting richer responses. Throughout the interviews, efforts were consistently made to foster an open, non-judgmental, and comfortable environment, enabling the collection of honest, unfiltered, and valuable data, enhancing credibility.

3.5.2 Dependability and Confirmability

For this research, we ensured dependability through the creation of a clear audit trail. This involved documenting methodological decisions, data collection procedures, and coding strategies to provide transparency and facilitate potential replication of the study (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

To support confirmability, a peer review process was implemented, whereby the respective other researcher independently reviewed the coded transcripts. Any discrepancies in interpretation were critically reflected and discussed, fostering a consensus on the data analysis. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were held after each interview to examine emerging themes and interpretations, thereby minimizing our potential bias.

3.5.3 Transferability

Although qualitative research does not allow for statistical generalization, transferability was facilitated by providing thick, rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings. These detailed contextual descriptions aim for the reader to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings or populations. Nevertheless, transferring these study's findings to different settings or populations might lead to misleading conclusions.

By employing these strategies, this study seeks to uphold rigorous standards of qualitative research, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.6 Limitations

This study employs a range of validation procedures to ensure credibility, reliability, and rigor, highlighting the importance of maintaining research quality in qualitative, interpretivist inquiries. Given the inherently subjective nature of identity expression and fashion-related

decision-making, these strategies aimed to contribute to enhancing the study's overall trustworthiness and transparency.

Despite these efforts, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of twenty participants, coupled with the qualitative research design, prioritizing depth over breadth, limits the generalizability of findings. This limitation aligns with the study's aim to gain detailed, context-specific insights rather than to produce statistically generalizable conclusions, as is common in quantitative research. For future research, incorporating larger and more diverse samples may provide broader insights and reveal cross-contextual patterns.

Although participants provide varied national backgrounds, all were situated within Western cultural contexts. Fashion and branding in these settings are shaped by particular socioeconomic, political, and aesthetic frameworks, which does not translate to societies where clothing practices are informed by a different value system, for example religious norms, collectivist ideologies, resources or alternative aesthetic traditions. This cultural homogeneity limits the transferability of the findings.

Furthermore, participants' responses were likely influenced by factors such as financial and educational background, age, and personal experiences, all of which shape perceptions of branding and self-expression. For instance, individuals with greater economic resources may choose invisibly branded clothing for different reasons than those people who are more price-sensitive. While having found that maturity seems to change brand perception and identity construction, generational differences in fashion consumption, social identity, and brand awareness may have affected participants' perspectives in ways not fully explored in this study.

In addition to considering the participants' educational backgrounds, it is important to acknowledge that English was not the first language for most participants. This may have influenced both their responses and their ability to articulate their thoughts clearly. Although comprehension was facilitated through follow-up questions when necessary, language barriers may still have restricted participants' ability to fully express complex feelings, thoughts, and motivations.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

3.7.1 Informed Consent

Throughout the research process, careful attention was paid to potential ethical considerations. To address these, all participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study, the structure of the interview process, and the intended use of their data within the context of this thesis. An open, transparent dialogue was established with each participant to ensure their full understanding and voluntary agreement to participate. Each individual

received a written consent form detailing the scope and aims of the research, with their consent formally documented through their signature.

Furthermore, efforts were made to ensure that all information was presented in an accessible and comprehensible manner, adapted to the age and cognitive capacity of the participants. This included the use of simplified language and verbal explanations, where appropriate, to facilitate understanding. Additionally, we were committed to upholding the autonomy of participants and fostering a relationship of trust throughout the engagement process.

3.7.2 Confidentiality and Privacy

Maintaining confidentiality and protecting participants' privacy were fundamental ethical obligations in this research. During the interviews, participants disclosed personal and, at times, sensitive information. Accordingly, strict measures were implemented to safeguard the data from unauthorized third-party access. This commitment was especially important given that the study also engaged with sensitive themes like sexual orientation. At all times, privacy and anonymity were ensured with special caution when using quotes and content from the interviews.

3.7.3 Bias and Assumptions

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is inherently interactive, involving the interpretation of participants' narratives and experiences. Acknowledging this, we remained critically aware of our own assumptions and potential biases throughout the data collection and analysis phase. Conscious efforts were made to respect and accurately represent the perspectives of the participants. Again, to enhance the credibility of the findings, interpretations were subjected to mutual review and reflective dialogue, fostering a more balanced and rigorous analytical process.

3.7.4 Power Dynamics

The inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant in interview settings was recognized as a possible source of influence on participant responses. Such imbalances can create discomfort and may lead individuals to provide socially desirable rather than honest answers. To minimize these effects, we aimed to create a safe and supportive interview environment. These included adopting an open and empathetic approach, offering participants multiple modes of expression, and allowing sufficient time for reflection. These efforts aimed to empower participants to share their experiences freely and authentically.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This methodology chapter outlines the qualitative, inductive approach employed in the study to investigate why middle-class consumers express themselves through invisible branding.

This research adheres to an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and subjective, aligning with the study's aim to explore the motivations behind individual fashion choices for invisible brands. The research design is rooted in social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, emphasizing identity as a fluid, negotiated process shaped by cultural interactions and personal decisions rather than as an objectively measurable construct.

To gain a deep understanding of participants' fashion-related behaviour and identity expression, the study employs semi-structured interviews. The flexibility of this interview format allows for a balance between structured inquiry and the opportunity for participants to express their perspectives in their own words. A total of twenty participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling methods, with a focus on individuals who intentionally avoid overt branding. Participants were recruited from both personal networks and social media platforms, ensuring a diverse sample with a clear focus on middle-class consumers.

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative analysis of interviews, which is particularly suited to examining how individuals construct and communicate themselves through storytelling. This approach enabled us to explore the ways in which participants' fashion choices reflect broader cultural and social frameworks, and to identify underlying motives for their self-expression through invisibly branded fashion. This study emphasizes depth over breadth, providing detailed, context-specific insights rather than generalizable findings.

To ensure credibility, deliberate efforts were made to create an open, non-judgmental, and comfortable interview environment, thereby facilitating the collection of honest, unfiltered, and meaningful data. Engagement with participants and the use of follow-up questions helped to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Reflexivity was maintained through regular journaling and debriefing sessions to minimize bias and ensure transparent data analysis. However, limitations such as the small sample size and cultural homogeneity of the participant pool were acknowledged.

Furthermore, we acknowledge ethical considerations among the research process. This includes not only to well-inform the participants and gather their consent, but also paying great attention to confidentiality and data privacy, respecting the participant's perspectives, addressing own assumptions and bias, as well as minimizing power dynamics in interview situations.

In conclusion, the methodology section of this study outlines a comprehensive, flexible approach to understand the complex process of self-expression through fashion choices. By prioritizing depth through qualitative analysis, the study provides valuable insights into the motivations behind our participants' consumption choices of invisibly branded fashion, while also acknowledging the limitations inherent in qualitative research.

4 Analysis

Our study investigates the motivations that lead middle-class consumers to deliberately avoid visibly branded fashion items in their expression of self. Therefore, the following section presents the process of the analysis. For the analysis of the data, collected through twenty interviews, we employed, apart from the qualitative analysis of the interviews, a coding approach to identify elements pertinent to the central research question of this study. This systematic method of coding facilitated the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns in participants' behaviours, mindsets, and motivations regarding invisible brands, we from now on call *motive* or *theme*.

Accordingly, nine motives that emerged consistently across interviews with different participants were initially outlined and discussed for each interview. After careful consideration, we narrowed the analysis down to the four most dominant and substantial themes. A summary of the most important excerpts from the interviews corresponding with each motive can be found in thematic tables in Appendix A.

4.1 Articulation of Maturity

One of the most prominent motives identified in participants' responses is the concept of *Articulation of Maturity*. When asked whether a specific turning point or influence led our respondents to prefer invisible to visible brands, many participants cited age as a relevant key factor. Whereas currently they avoid consuming visible brands, a common sentiment was that during adolescence. Particularly in high school, there was greater social pressure to wear overtly branded clothing in order to gain acceptance within particular peer groups. As Participant 1 noted: "I cared a lot more if something was branded back when I was a teenager and in school because wearing brands was necessary to be cool."

Regardless of nationality, educational background, or current age, almost every participant recalled a desire during their school years to be associated with the most admired and socially accepted groups by wearing the same visible brands as their peers:

Probably when I was 10 or 11 years old and my classmates started wearing branded clothes. I felt like I needed to wear the same branded clothes to be accepted and to belong to the group of the 'cool kids'. (Participant 2)

Notably, there is a clear progression in how individuals perceive and engage with branded fashion, closely mirroring Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's (1986) framework divides life into distinct psychosocial stages, each characterized by particular developmental challenges and tasks. Within this context, fashion and branding

function as tools of identity formation, self-expression, and social negotiation; tools whose meaning and relevance shift significantly as individuals mature. The first critical stage to consider is *Adolescence*, which Erikson identifies as emerging approximately ages 12 to 18. According to him, during this period, individuals face the psychosocial task of identity versus role confusion. Adolescents are challenged to explore a sense of self, often through external experimentation. This is echoed by Participant 15:

Dude, in high school, when everybody was wearing that freaking Hollister stuff. That's where they got me. I do have to say. That's where they got me. I wanted to be part of the game. I think I've done a good job at overcoming that.

This identity exploration is marked by trial and error, visible in fluctuating behaviours, changing social groups, and transforming clothing preferences. Erikson (1986) argued that this phase is dominated by the question of “Who am I?”, with individuals often adopting multiple identities, aiming for coherence and stability. Mair (2018) underscores this examination by discussing how people often use fashion, in this context visible brands, to explore, redefine or reinforce our own developed concept of self.

From this perspective, we found that overt branded clothing has become a highly visible and socially significant medium through which adolescents attempt to express identity and gain peer acceptance. The desire to fit in with socially dominant, admired groups was commonly expressed, often with references to specific brands that symbolized belonging. Participant 8 reflects this dynamic: “When I was a teenager, I just wanted to have that one trendy piece.” During this phase of life, the consumption of visibly branded clothing frequently operates as a mechanism for social integration. It offers a sense of security and group identity in a life phase dominated by the turbulence of self-discovery. As Participant 4 notes: “Of course, there was a time when I was a teenager, we all had to deal with a lot of insecurities and then this (wearing brands) would have helped.” Here, visibly branded fashion serves both as a tool against social anxiety and as a performative tool in the search for self-acceptance.

Moreover, within the overarching theme of Articulation of Maturity, the subtheme of *Growing Confidence* emerged. Once overcoming adolescence, and the insecurities that come with it, participants conveyed a pronounced sense of self-assurance, demonstrating trust in their own fashion choices and social status. They exhibited alignment with their personal appearance and prioritized self-expression, emphasizing the importance of feeling confident in their own skin. Respondents described feeling increasingly at ease with their own fashion choices, regardless of external expectations or judgments. Participant 3 articulated this sentiment clearly: “Even if the people around me would criticize me for not wearing branded clothes, I am quite confident that I would not let my style get influenced by others.”

This shift in confidence can be explained through the second developmental stage examined by Erikson (1986) called *Young Adulthood*. This stage is defined as the period between

approximately 18 and 40 years of age. In this stage, the primary psychosocial task shifts toward intimacy versus isolation, with a focus on forming stable relationships and achieving emotional maturity. This internal stability often translates into external expressions, including fashion choices that are less about social belonging and more about authentic self-expression. The need to impress others diminishes, replaced by a growing emphasis on self-definition, confidence and personal preference. This transition is evidenced by several respondents, who describe a diminishing concern with obvious branding as they entered their twenties. Participant 1 offers a clear account of this developmental shift:

I cared a lot more if something was branded back when I was a teenager and in school because wearing brands was necessary to be cool. I started caring less when I turned 22, I think, because I didn't pressure myself to impress other people with clothes and started to just think about that stuff for myself.

As emotional maturity develops, so does the desire to present oneself in a way that aligns with internal values rather than external validation. Participant 18 underscores this examination: "At this point in my life, I don't care too much anymore. I just try what I feel like that looks good." These narratives reflect a more autonomous and internally driven approach to fashion. Rather than relying on prominent brand names as symbols of self-expression, participants begin to articulate a more personal and consistent aesthetic, as Erikson describes it, an "individual uniform". Moreover, this stage of development sees how the pressure to conform weakens, and personal style becomes priority, rather than following social trends. Participant 17 reflects this maturation of aesthetic preference by stating the following:

Right now, when you're older, and you don't really care. It's more about the style itself than about the brand of the items. Like when I look at people, I don't see the brands, especially. But I see personal style.

This observation highlights the broader shift in perceptual focus from external, visible labels to internal coherence and originality. Thus, fashion choices become a reflection of self-knowledge rather than a tool for social acceptance.

Maturity and increasing self-confidence are highly reflected in the second sub theme identified within the broader theme of maturity. Participants expressed a strong sense of comfort in no longer feeling compelled to conform to mainstream fashion trends. Their responses suggest a conscious *Resistance to Societal Norms*, indicating a diminished influence of social pressure on their clothing choices. To further illustrate this resistance to mainstream trends and external pressures, Participant 13 added:

I don't care about that. I'm gonna get whatever I like the most. I don't care about the brand. Or if somebody tells me that, oh, you should wear this and that I'm like, Okay, thank you for your suggestion. I will not follow.

The growing resistance to external pressure can be directly linked to the third stage Erikson identifies, the *Middle Adulthood*, which usually includes the ages of approximately 40 to 65. This stage is defined by the psychosocial task of generativity versus stagnation, wherein individuals seek to contribute meaningfully to society and to consolidate a fully developed self-concept. As Erikson notes, individuals in this stage often reach a high level of confidence and clarity that allows them to reject societal pressures and norms fully and embrace authenticity in self-expression. Participant 15 reflects Erikson's finding:

This is where I draw the line. I think this is where people who would like brands and flashy stuff wear those to impress others, and people who don't care wear the clothes they are wearing because they like them.

Mair (2018) emphasizes that dressing in a manner congruent with one's personal identity can enhance self-esteem and contribute to an increased sense of confidence. The role of fashion here becomes less about social signaling and more about comfort, alignment with personal values, and self-expression rooted in lived experience.

Several participants demonstrated this shift, noting a growing disinterest in trends and a stronger alignment with internal preferences. Respondent 11 exemplifies this process of a matured self: "So, yeah, that's when I started, like, Okay, should I? Should I not? And then I decided, no, I shouldn't go with it (mainstream trends)." This resistance to socially prescribed fashion choices illustrate the increased agency and self-assuredness characteristic of Middle Adulthood. Participant 15 underscores this shift: "But I don't think I care. Like, I don't care as long as I'm comfortable and I like what I'm wearing out there."

Erikson's model helps to further contextualize this phenomenon, suggesting that in Middle Adulthood, external validation loses its grip as individuals come to prioritize emotional well-being and self-consistency. As such, many participants articulated a reduced anxiety about others' judgments, describing a sense of liberation in dressing according to personal taste. The reduction in brand visibility among participants at this stage reflects a deep-seated confidence and an internalized sense of worth that no longer depends on the symbolic capital of clear branded goods. This is illustrated by Participant 14:

I think it sends the message that they don't want a brand name to tell about themselves. And they trust on their taste. Because they can show that they have a good style without the help of a brand name behind it. And it just shows they don't care about brands. Just care about what matters.

To conclude, the motive of Articulated Maturity plays a crucial role in the evolution of individuals' relationships with branded clothing. As illustrated through Erikson's developmental framework, supported by participants' reflections, the need for external affirmation via brand affiliation is strongest during teenage years, when identity is in flux and external approval is fundamental. In Young Adulthood, as individuals begin to form stable

identities and meaningful relationships, the reliance on visible brands diminishes. By Middle Adulthood, self-assuredness and internal consistency often lead to a complete redefinition of style, with many participants rejecting social pressures in favour of authenticity and comfort.

For our study, this development highlights how the meaning of fashion changes over time. Where once overt brands symbolized the desire for social belonging and identity experimentation, we found that they gradually lose significance in the face of growing self-awareness and emotional security. Maturity thus enables individuals to dress not for others, but for themselves, choosing what aligns with their personal values, aesthetic preferences, and internal coherence. Ultimately, the ability to resist transient fashion trends, dominated by brand dependency, signals not only confidence but also a deeper psychological maturity, grounded in a stable and integrated sense of self, as Participant 19 noticed: “But I would say it helped my confidence and just figuring out what I like and being able to focus on what I like is most important.”

4.2 Expression of Authenticity

Another recurring motivation that emerged across nearly all participant accounts centered around the *Expression of Authenticity*. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked how fashion contributes to their identity construction and self-expression and what role invisible branding plays in that process. Consistently, respondents voiced a shared concern: that highly visible brand markers often overpower their individuality, distracting from who they genuinely are. Statements such as “You first judge the brand, then the person” (Participant 14) and “I don’t want it if it makes me feel that I’m like a branded person” (Participant 18) reveal the desire for self-expression that is not filtered or distorted by external brand associations. Rather than acting as expressive tools, visible logos were often described as intrusive symbols that carry predefined associations that may not reflect the wearer’s values, character, or sense of self. As Participant 3 explained, invisible brands offer a sense of control over personal representation: “To make sure the clothes don’t distract from the characteristics a person has.” Respondents chose not to let a visible brand decide on what they stand for or what personality is associated with them, but rather to dress freely based on who they want to be. As Participant 8 put it: “I want the people to discover my personality rather than believe I’m this kind of a person just because of a Gucci logo for example.”

We found that, for many, invisibly branded clothing is not just a stylistic preference, but a mechanism for feeling more authentic. By removing the overt signals embedded in logos, participants felt they could present a version of themselves that was more intentional, refined, and aligned with their internal sense of identity. Clothing, in this view, becomes a blank canvas rather than a branded script.

Often, we're being associated with a certain brand. So in a way, these people who wear invisible brands are the people who have the biggest personality, so they don't need

anything else to show their personality. Because they are complete in a way, in this sense, they don't need another way of showing who they are. (Participant 13)

While visibly branded items can help to express who one wants to be, it can send wrong signals or values. Our participants deliberately avoid overt branding to make sure they can use clothing in the exact way they want and present their personality to the world based on an invisibly branded style. Several participants described how wearing invisibly branded clothing allowed them to enhance their authenticity in style and character. Participant 8 expressed this link clearly: “I do feel more authentic when wearing non-branded clothes because I feel like my personality is much deeper than wearing branded clothes.” This shows how invisibly branded fashion items are an opportunity for our participants to feel more original and real. Participant 15 illustrates this well:

I feel like if I wear branded clothes, then it's like I'm only wearing them because of the brand. But if I wear clothes that don't have the brand on them, that's more authentic because I actually like the piece of clothing.

Closely aligning with the themes from our study, the findings of Tiwari et al. (2024) demonstrate that fashion functions as both a reflective and projective tool of identity. They argue that fashion enables individuals to experiment with self-concept and to project aspirational versions of themselves. In their study, 71% of respondents reported that their fashion choices actively shape the kind of person they want to become. This perspective positions authenticity not as a fixed trait but as something socially performed and symbolically constructed through everyday choices, such as clothing. This resonates with Smelik's (2011) argument that personality in fashion is not an inherent quality but a performed and mediated construct, shaped through cultural codes and aesthetic practices. Rather than revealing a true or fixed self, fashion enables individuals to stage identity in ways that appear authentic, which Smelik (2011) describes as a “stylized performance of self” that is contextually and socially negotiated. Building on this, our findings suggest that invisibly branded clothing strengthens this sense of performed authenticity, allowing individuals to express identity without the distraction or social signaling associated with visible logos. While fashion acts as a vehicle for self-expression, participants emphasized that obvious branding could overshadow the personal meanings behind their clothing choices. For example, Participant 11 emphasized that “it's an important part of me to show who I am,” while Participant 15 explained that “the way I dress is also my personality... it's a glimpse of who I am.” In this sense, minimal or logo-free garments allow for a subtler, and often more credible articulation of the self, that feels internally authentic rather than externally imposed.

Many participants expressed that visible branding compromised their ability to feel authentic. Prominent logos were seen as carriers of pre-defined meanings, often incongruent with their personal values or sense of self. As Participant 4 noted, “If I personally feel authentic and confident, I express that to my environment and that is how they see me then.” This reflects

what Wardaya et al. (2024) define as the embodied expression of authenticity, a state where fashion choices resonate with internal character and cultural alignment. According to their findings, authenticity is not a surface-level aesthetic, but a felt coherence between appearance and inner values. Participant 13's statement, "I perceive myself as more authentic, definitely", offers a telling example of this alignment. In many cases, invisible brands were not merely non-brands, but rather symbols of authenticity and independence. Instead of choosing to dress based on an obvious label or its commercial appeal, they let participants choose items based on aesthetic integrity, personality compatibility, or emotional connection.

Adding a critical dimension, Ford (2021) frames authenticity in fashion as a resistance against the symbolic saturation of consumer goods. He argues that authenticity arises not just through style, but from the refusal to let identity be defined by corporate narratives and commodified images. In this light, Participant 15's statement: "They don't want a brand name to tell them about themselves", becomes a clear assertion of agency. It represents a refusal to allow personal meaning to be overtaken by mass-market symbolism. For these participants, invisible branding became a vehicle for intentionality and symbolic control. They wear what they feel aligns with their inner sense of self, not what is dictated by cultural trends or logos.

Summarized, our findings show that by stripping away preloaded meanings embedded in visible branding, participants created room to express nuanced, self-directed identities and to feel, as Participant 14 succinctly put it, "100% more authentic." This reflects a broader cultural shift identified across the literature: one that privileges inner alignment, emotional clarity, and symbolic autonomy in an era increasingly shaped by overbranding and performative consumption.

4.3 Signaling Exclusivity

Moreover, a frequently identified motive that emerged unprompted from participants was *Signaling Exclusivity*. Although usually associated with luxury and high class status, our participants, belonging to the middle-class, described how wearing invisible brands allows them to feel special and rare, since only people 'in the know' recognize and appreciate their fashion choices.

If you go around wearing a hoodie and everyone knows that hoodie is from that brand, but it's not clearly from that brand, it's like an insider knowledge that if you're lucky enough to know, then you understand. (Participant 17)

This is a vivid example of how in the participant's everyday life, the exclusivity of invisibly branded fashion is expressed. Even though visible markers are missing, some people in their environment know from which brand the piece of clothing is from and are part of this group of people in the loop. A similar occurrence was echoed by Participant 20:

“Even whenever something doesn't have a big logo on it, if you have a trained eye it's very easy to recognize that as related to a brand. But you just have a look at it, and you know. When you know, you know.”

Rather than relying on visible logos or price points to convey uniqueness, participants expressed a preference for clothing that could only be understood by those who possessed a particular kind of fashion literacy. Participant 18 captured this dynamic clearly when they described how invisibly branded clothing signals belonging to a “special private club.” While not wanting to be associated with an overtly shown brand through logo display, factors like quality, fabric, and style are important for the interviewed consumers to be knowledgeable enough to be part of this exclusivity. This is why our participants deliberately choose to wear invisible brands, as Participant 16 describes: “I guess to some extent I like the ‘those who know, they know’ type things.” In this sense, invisible fashion is a way of showing belonging to an exclusive society without being part of the luxury elite.

This form of subtle signaling is strongly supported by Berger and Ward's (2010) work on inconspicuous consumption, which shows that consumers often use quiet, low-visibility cues to express identity and status. In their study, they argue that many consumers, particularly those with a higher degree of cultural knowledge or symbolic literacy, often avoid mainstream signaling tactics in favor of more nuanced, insider-oriented markers. Rather than seeking wide recognition, these consumers aim to be understood only by a select, discerning audience who can accurately interpret subtle stylistic cues. This is precisely what many of our participants articulated, such as Participant 10's reflection: “Those who know can recognize the brand even without a logo,” which illustrates how, in this view, exclusivity is less about being seen by everyone and more about being recognized by a select, insightful few. What matters is not public visibility, but the ability to be identified and understood by those who share the same symbolic knowledge. Participant 8 articulates this openly: “I can wear a very good brand, but it just does not need to be shown on the outside of the clothes.” This silent form of signaling relies on what is known rather than what is shown, and thus becomes a marker of in-group belonging and cultural capital (Berger & Ward, 2010). The social value of the garment is only activated when decoded by someone with the necessary background knowledge.

Eckhardt et al. (2015) expand this idea by describing the rise of inconspicuous consumption as a broader cultural shift in which taste is communicated through non-obvious cues. They argue that this behaviour depends on the possession of cultural capital, a form of symbolic literacy that allows individuals to identify quality, craftsmanship, or brand provenance through subtle visual details such as stitching, silhouette, or material. According to them, through this shift from conspicuous to inconspicuous consumption, over the past ten years, wealth and status is no longer displayed through loud logos and symbolic markers. Instead, design, sophistication, and subtleness are now tools for brands and their consumers to signal social status. The participants in our research mirrored this tendency, frequently referencing

the importance of “a trained eye” (Participant 20) or recognizing “things you don’t notice unless you know” (Participant 18). For them, visible branding was unnecessary, while true distinction resided in knowing what others missed.

These behaviours also align with Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of distinction, which argues that individuals use taste to create social separation. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital manifests through preferences for what is understated, refined, and difficult to imitate. In our study, invisible branding operated in this exact manner: by marking insiders who could decode subtle signals, while excluding those who rely on overt brand recognition. This explains why even participants with no elite financial status still described feeling “special” (Participant 17) when their clothing was recognized by others with similar aesthetic awareness.

Crucially, this form of exclusivity was not about flaunting status through overt markers, but about signaling quality and discernment through subtle cues. Participants described exclusivity not as elitist, but as a quiet form of belonging, a selective visibility grounded in shared understanding. As Participant 14 put it:

Let's not give any brand, but you can see a good suit and a bad suit without seeing the brand on it. I think that's how unbranded brands carry their value to society.

Here, exclusivity becomes less about exclusion and more about affiliation through subtlety, being seen not by everyone, but by certain people, in a particular way.

The discussion of exclusivity among our participants reflects an important evolution in how status, taste, and expression of self are negotiated in everyday fashion with everyday consumers. Rather than rejecting visible branding altogether, our respondents selectively engage with it on their own terms, while seeking distinction not through visibility but through nuance. This reinforces the academic shift from conspicuous to coded consumption, offering a contemporary understanding of how middle-class consumers navigate symbolic boundaries through invisible branding in a saturated visual landscape.

4.4 Control of Perception

The fourth motive, *Control of Perception*, was identified during a later stage of the analysis, after consensus had already been reached regarding thematic categories. However, upon repeated reviews of the interview data, it became increasingly apparent that participants frequently expressed concerns about how they are perceived by others, an issue that surfaced consistently across nearly all interviews. This concern is articulated by Participant 8:

I think this is a generational dilemma. Gen Z for me is this individualism, free spirit. I feel like I'm more on the millennial side, I care about it a lot and ask myself: How am I perceived by others? I do care about that.

This sentiment underscores that participants are concerned with how they are viewed within their social environments, and by extension, how they are evaluated and judged. Consequently, the assumption that participants are indifferent to appearance or external perceptions, based solely on their preference for subtly branded clothing, cannot be substantiated by our findings. Despite describing themselves as mature, confident, self-aware of their own values, and largely disengaged from conforming to mainstream expectations, participants nonetheless conveyed a persistent desire to be positively perceived by others and to be favorably regarded in their social settings.

This concern aligns with the critique by Diaz-Meneses (2010) of traditional consumer behaviour models, which tend to emphasize rationality over emotion. Instead, emotional and social pressures emerge as significant influences shaping fashion-related behaviours and perceptions. In this context, fashion is not merely a vehicle for self-expression but functions as a tool for social navigation. Mair (2018) further supports this view, showing that fashion plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals are perceived. She highlights that first impressions, often formed within seconds, can influence both interpersonal dynamics and individuals' confidence and behaviour.

Interestingly, participants did not attribute this influence primarily to conspicuous labels or visible branding. Rather, they placed greater emphasis on the aesthetic coherence of their clothing and their conduct in social contexts. As Participant 2 explains:

“I would rather be perceived by the way I act or at least by the way the fashion looks like itself than by the brands that are printed on the fashion items.”

This statement highlights the importance of reflecting both personality and individual fashion choices through clothing. Participant 11 expresses this motivation: “I want to show, both in the way that I act, but also the way that I dress, that I'm nice and welcoming.”

Participants also valued aesthetic harmony more highly than brand visibility, often rejecting the notion of being defined by conspicuous brand logos. As Participant 6 stated:

I don't want to be reduced to a brand ambassador, I buy garments because I like them in cut, colour and material and fit me well and not because they are from a certain brand.

This intentional distancing from brand identities, and clothing altogether, introduces an additional layer to the theme of controlling perception. For instance, Participant 3 notes: “I do want people around me to like me, but my style or my fashion choices should not play too much of a role for that.”

Similarly, Participant 2 articulates a conscious effort to manage the own image without relying on the associations embedded in branded clothing:

Brands are connected with a certain image. Displaying them will lead to provoking a perception of myself in others based on that image. Yes, because it (wearing invisibly branded clothes) contributes better to the image I have of myself than wearing branded clothes.

Taken together, these insights suggest that while participants are considerate of how they are perceived, they seek to manage these perceptions through styling and personality rather than conspicuous brand display. This active self-presentation can be directly linked to Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management. As he argues, individuals behave in specific ways to influence how they are perceived by others. According to him, people engage in strategic self-presentation to align others' impressions with the image they wish to project. Participant 19 conveys this awareness:

(...) But I mean everyone is judging the book by its cover often, so we always get a first impression and I would like that to be a good one. So yeah, I would say it's kind of important for me.

Participant 14 echoes this sentiment, highlighting a desire for controlled judgment based on aesthetics rather than brands: "I think I want people to judge my outfit if it looks good or bad. But I don't want the brand to play a role."

Adding a new level to the motive of controlled perception, Participant 18 offers a critique of the commodification of identity through branding:

I don't want it if it makes me feel that I'm like a branded person, that I'm kind of a, I don't know. I'm a person that is the advertisement for a brand that I gain nothing from.

The aspiration to decouple brand identity from personal identity and self-expression suggests a level of psychological maturity and self-confidence. According to Erikson (1986), individuals who successfully navigate the developmental stage of adolescence tend to achieve a stable sense of self, characterized by a reduced dependence on external validation. Earlier findings demonstrated that participants had reached this developmental milestone. Although current data indicate that respondents remain concerned with external perception, this concern is no longer primarily focused on brand visibility. Instead, it stems from a desire to maintain personal agency over how one's appearance is perceived by others. Rather than allowing brand displays to speak on their behalf, individuals prefer to assert their maturity, confidence, and self-assurance through self-related style and personality.

Overall, participants demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the dual function of clothing: as a means of self-expression and as a tool for managing social impressions. This duality is succinctly articulated by Participant 20:

Because I think when you're talking about fashion, you're talking about self-expression, yes, but you're also talking about how you are going to be perceived in the world which I think it's fair. Because it's realistic.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that individuals who prefer invisibly branded clothing remain invested in social perception. Rather than rejecting the social dimensions of fashion altogether, they seek to be evaluated on the basis of personal, authentic style and behaviour in social interactions. This preference reflects not a disinterest in appearance, but a mature assertion of individuality. Participants continue to value first impressions, but they aim to shape these impressions on their own terms, prioritizing agency, taste, and authenticity over passive association with brand identities. Consequently, a preference for invisible branding should not be interpreted as indifference to social judgment, but rather as a redefinition of how individuals wish to be seen, favouring substance, character, and curated style over the symbolic capital of visible branding.

5 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the research's key findings that were analyzed in the previous section. Additionally, we answer this study's research question, discuss contributions to the field of Consumer Culture Theory and traditional literature on identity expression, and reflect on the practical implications of the study. Lastly, we also suggest areas for future research, taking limitations into account.

To ensure a clear, comprehensible overview of our four dominant motives that emerged from the analysis, we provide a mind map, linking those themes with the most relevant literature supporting our findings.

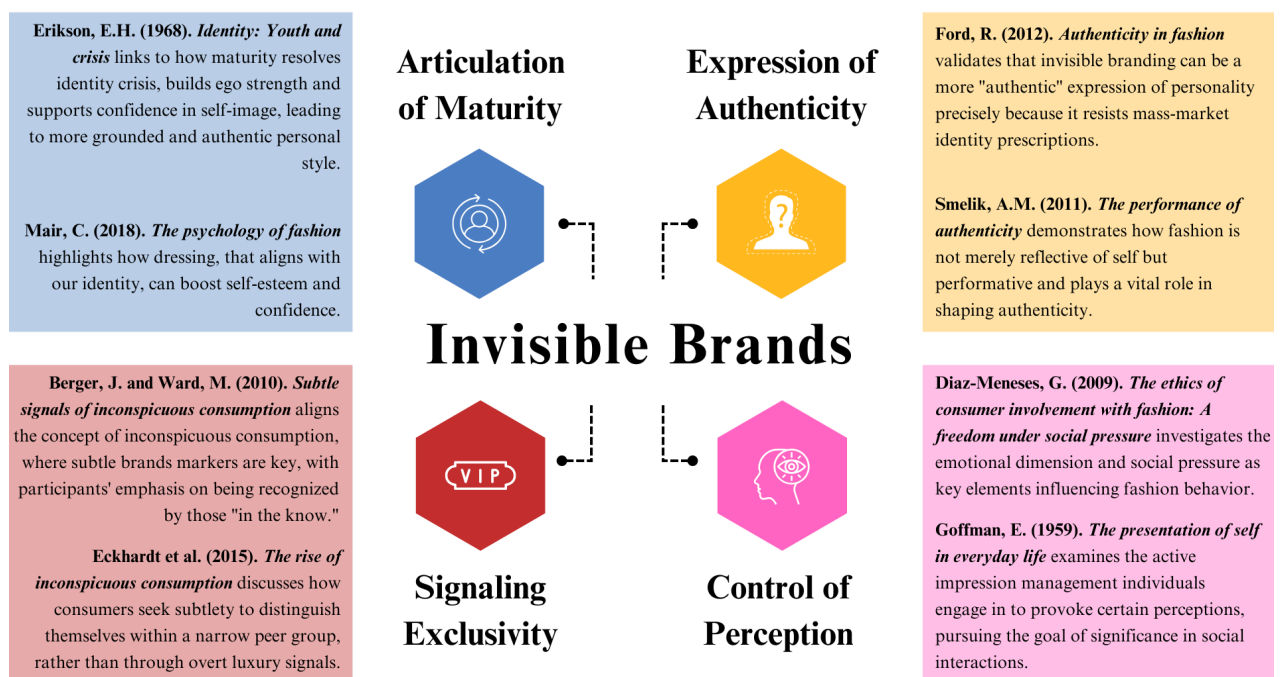


Figure 5.1 Mind Map of the Main Four Motives Emerged from the Data

5.1 Discussion of the Findings

In this section, we compare similarities and contrast differences from our empirical findings with the four theoretical streams discussed in the Literature Review. In doing so, we seek to shed light on how our study either contributes to or challenges established scholarship, most of which is grounded in Consumer Culture Theory.

5.1.1 Aligning Self-Expression with Personal Identity

What emerges clearly from the data is that consumption, though stripped of its most recognizable visual markers, remains deeply symbolic. Belk's (1988) concept of the extended self was not only reflected but reactivated in the context of invisibly branded fashion.

Participant 4's remark, "This way I can express who I am," illustrates that it is not overt branding per se, but the act of selection and the stylistic curation that endows a garment with personal meaning. This aligns with Tiwari et al.'s (2024) findings of fashion functioning as a tool of identity construction. Despite the lack of visible markers on their clothing, our participants use their fashion choices to express their personality to the outside world, making consumption a tool for identity expression.

Arnould and Thompson emphasize that, in the context of identity construction through consumption, identity involves aligning personal conceptions of the self with socially constructed symbols, norms, and values to create a coherent and meaningful narrative of the self (2023). Our empirical data demonstrate that respondents express their personal conception of identity through clothing consumption. Thus, the association between identity and consumption aligns with our research findings. However, participants appear to construct their identities through more subtle, distinctive symbols and values, rather than through overt visible displays.

Notably, age and life stage emerged as pivotal variables. The older the respondent, the more apparent the alignment between internal identity and its external expression. Although our research initially aimed to problematize the link between identity construction and brand usage, our findings do corroborate the theoretical insights of Arnould and Thompson, Belk, and Holt. But only in the specific stage of adolescence, when the confusion of identity heavily influenced decision-making on branded clothing. In this context, overt brands emerged as a highly visible and socially significant means of achieving acceptance by others and indicating social belonging. This observation is consistent with prior research claiming that, particularly in hedonic domains such as fashion, consumers explore multiple self-concepts, often adopting, modifying, or rejecting products and styles in response to their evolving roles and values (Arnould et al. 2003; Celsi et al. 1993). Participants recalled branded items as passports to peer groups, worn to dissolve ambiguity in identity performance. As Participant 8 put it, "When I was a teenager, I just wanted to have that one trendy piece." During this phase, they desired certain styles, gravitated toward branded items, and engaged in processes of collective value formation.

However, this association between visibility and belonging begins to erode with maturity. As participants moved into their twenties and beyond, a distinct shift occurred, from needing brands to signal collective belonging to needing distance from visible branding in order to express individuality. The symbolic function of clothing remained, but the mechanism shifted. Participant 3's assertion: "To make sure the clothes don't distract from the characteristics a

person has”, exemplifies this transformation. Branding no longer acted as a vehicle of self-expression but rather as a barrier to authentic presentation.

Additionally, Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective adds critical depth to our analysis of identity construction. As he proposes, individuals perform their identities in everyday life through the strategic display, or concealment, of symbolic cues. This aligns closely with our theme of perception, where participants, despite their apparent confidence in personal style, remain acutely aware of how they are interpreted by others. Thus, the commonly held assumption that individuals who avoid branded fashion are indifferent to how they are perceived is not borne out by our findings. In fact, participants expressed a desire to be understood, but not misread. Their resistance to overt branding was, paradoxically, part of a broader effort to manage perception more precisely through personal style, character and social behaviour. As Participant 2 explained, “I would rather be perceived by the way I act or at least by the way the fashion looks like itself than by the brands that are printed on the fashion items.” In this context, invisible branding turns into a tool for presenting oneself according to one’s own preferences, emphasizing subtlety over overt association.

This move toward symbolic control also connects to Naomi Klein’s (2000) critique in *No Logo*. Klein argues that branding has become so omnipresent and invasive that it no longer merely identifies a product, but colonizes identity itself. According to her, logos transform clothing into “empty carriers” for brand narratives that overshadow individual expression. Our participants echoed this concern, though often in more personal than political terms. Rather than framing their choices as resistance to capitalism or corporate overreach, they articulated a discomfort with the way logos impose predefined meanings that may contradict their self-concept. Participant 15’s statement: “They don’t want a brand name to tell them about themselves”, resonates with Klein’s central claim: visible branding has become so dominant that opting out becomes a meaningful, identity-preserving act.

Furthermore, participants described invisibly branded clothing as a kind of cultural code, only recognizable to those with the symbolic literacy to decode it. As Wang and Griskevicius (2014) suggest, fashion is often used as a relational signal, but our findings extend this concept beyond the realm of luxury consumers. Participant 18 described invisibly branded clothing as access to a “special private club,” revealing that subtlety is not the absence of social signaling but a refinement of it. Importantly, this extends to both genders, challenging the gender-specific scope of previous studies. While their study focused exclusively on women in high-end contexts, our data reveal that middle-class male participants also use invisible branding to perform social distinction. Thus, exclusivity through fashion is not solely a function of luxury or femininity, but a broader strategy used by diverse consumers to assert belonging without overt signaling.

Additionally, while much of the branding literature emphasizes that individuals use visible brands to communicate identity outwardly, our data complicates this narrative. Participants

deliberately distanced themselves from the performative image-work of logos. This does not mean they rejected identity signaling altogether. In fact, they remained highly invested in how their style reflected their values, but they rejected letting the brand speak louder than they do. What they sought instead was a form of authentic self-expression, unconstrained by commercial associations. This aligns with Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) account of identity construction through resistance to mainstream ideals. Participants did not simply want to stand out, they wanted to avoid becoming indistinct through conformity. Participant 19, for example, remarked: "Clothes with big logos feel quite boring and mainstream to me." This suggests that the choice to wear logo-free clothing is as much about differentiation and aesthetic integrity as it is about comfort or personal values. Resisting flashy logos, in this sense, becomes an additional layer of self-expression: a statement about rejecting mass homogeneity in favor of curated individuality.

In conclusion, this section of our findings contributes a key insight to the literature on identity expression through consumption. Middle-class consumers are not disengaging from visible brands entirely, but are reframing how they interact with them, choosing subtlety and symbolic control over visibility and external alignment. Their motives for avoiding visibly branded fashion, ranging from aesthetic autonomy and authenticity preservation to exclusive recognition and resistance to mainstream norms, underscore a broader transformation in consumer-brand relationships. As Klein warned, branding seeks to define the consumer; but as our participants show, the deliberate choice to avoid visible branding is demonstrating how consumers are reclaiming the ability to define and express themselves.

5.1.2 Rethinking Expression in a Branded World

The empirical findings from our study suggest that middle-class consumers deliberately engage in exclusive consumption practices through the use of invisibly branded clothing. This preference is not rooted in financial inaccessibility or the yearning for luxury, but in a desire to express cultural discernment, individuality, and insider status. This resonates with key components of Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction, in which consumption practices operate as tools for social differentiation, mediated by varying forms of capital, in particular cultural capital. According to him, upper-class individuals distinguish themselves not only through economic capital but also through the possession of *Legitimate Taste*, coded behaviours and preferences difficult to imitate and only legible to a few. Our participants' preferences for invisible branded clothing, recognizable only to those with a "trained eye" (Participant 20), strongly reflect this concept. It mirrors Bourdieu's argument that symbolic mastery over non-obvious cultural goods is used to affirm one's place in a social hierarchy. In this context, invisible branding serves as a contemporary form of cultural distinction, in a subtle and coded way, only noticeable to those who share similar dispositions.

Our findings also support claims regarding Currid-Halkett's (2024) theory of inconspicuous consumption. She argues that members of the *Aspirational Class*, which are usually

well-educated, upper-middle-class professionals, differentiate themselves not through luxury goods but through more ethical and morally coded consumption such as sustainable fashion or organic materials. This model highlights how exclusivity is maintained not through price or brand, but through access to cultural capital and value-based decisions. Our participants similarly demonstrate a preference for subtlety and insider signaling, particularly via aesthetics, material quality, and brands that “you don't recognize unless you know, and you see it” (Participant 18). In accordance with Currid-Halkett's (2024) aspirational class, our respondents also emphasized sustainability and ethical value, such as how a brand demonstrates its commitment to a community, seen at the example Participant 20 gives: “I support this brand because they are supporting LGBTQ causes, not only in June (pride month).” This shows that their consumption choices are also moralized and driven through aesthetic and identity-linked factors, as well as moral and social responsibility.

Despite these overlaps, our findings also challenge and complicate the classical distinction models. While Bourdieu (1984) focused on the reproduction of class boundaries, arguing that cultural capital is largely inherited and used to reinforce elite dominance, our findings present that middle-class consumers actively engage in similar mechanisms of distinction. These consumers may not possess elite forms of institutional capital, like elite education or wealth, but they nonetheless adopt practices typically associated with higher social stratification. This suggests that the logic of distinction may be increasingly democratized, with symbolic literacy no longer exclusive to only the upper class. As such, the findings complicate Bourdieu's model by showing how consumers outside the traditional elite strategically use missing visual cues to simulate exclusivity without economic exclusivity.

Furthermore, participants' use of invisible branding as a form of selective belonging, rather than exclusion, signals another key departure from Bourdieu. The goal is not to distance oneself from others through inaccessible signs, but to connect with a like-minded, culturally fluent group through shared understanding. Participant 16, for example, described liking the “those who know, know” aspect of certain invisible brands, not because others were excluded, but because recognition required a particular kind of cultural awareness. In this way, invisible branding embodies what we refer to as *Democratic Exclusivity*: a mode of distinction that does not rely on price or prestige, but on subtle, more accessible cues legible to those with shared knowledge. Rather than reinforcing rigid social boundaries, this form of branding facilitates a quieter and more inclusive form of belonging.

The findings also stand in clear contrast to Veblen's (1925) concept of conspicuous consumption, where elites display wealth through pompous, often inefficient goods to signal exemption from labour and achieve social superiority. This involves not only signaling exemption from productive labour, but also engaging in individual comparison, where value is derived from being “visibly” above others. However, the participants in our study, representing middle-class consumers, actively resist this visibility-based logic. Their

preference for invisibly branded clothing is explicitly anti-conspicuous. Here, the logic of a democratic exclusivity comes into focus: status is not claimed through ostentation or material excess, but through cultural fluency and subtle discernment. Recognition is available not only to the wealthy, but to those who read the quiet codes embedded in fabric, fit, and form. Rather than reinforcing hierarchy through spectacle, these consumers construct belonging through restraint, reframing exclusivity as a matter of shared sensibility rather than social distance.

Additionally, we found that our participants did not mimic elite fashion behaviour in a visible or brand-oriented sense, which stands against Veblen's concept of pecuniary emulation. Instead, they subvert his logic by disengaging from overt status cues altogether. In fact, some participants described obvious branding as "tacky" or "immature" (e.g. Participants 8, 15, 20), further suggesting a rejection of visibility, as Veblen suggests, in favor of symbolic minimalism. While exclusivity remains important, it becomes democratized, with its expression having shifted from extravagant display to symbolic subtlety and accessible environment-based decoding.

Furthermore, a review of the extant literature (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 2004; Edgell, 1999) reveals a widespread consensus that consumers employ brands as communicative tools to communicate personal values, identity, and desired social positioning. Branding thus operates at the nexus of individual identity construction and collective mechanisms of social stratification. However, our empirical findings indicate a notable divergence from this perspective. Many respondents saw visible branding as a distortion rather than a support of personal expression. As Participant 14 put it, "You can be part of that group without showing any brands in your clothes." This decoupling of social affiliation from visible consumption highlights a cultural redefinition of group belonging, one that privileges authenticity and recognition over visibility.

In summary, while our findings support the notion that consumption remains a tool for social expression and positioning, they challenge the form that it takes. The motives for avoiding visibly branded fashion among middle-class consumers lie not in disengagement from self-expression, but in a desire for aesthetic clarity, personal alignment, and symbolic control. Through invisible branding, participants seek to differentiate themselves subtly, through interpretive depth instead of loud signals. This shift not only contests long-standing assumptions of conspicuous consumption and elite taste, but also reframes distinction as a form of quiet belonging, no longer exclusive to the upper class, and increasingly accessible to those who simply know what to look for.

5.1.3 Symbolic Refusal of Symbols

Our participants' avoidance of visible branding poses a direct challenge to decades of branding literature that emphasize the symbolic and social utility of visible logos. From Levy's (1959) foundational work, which frames consumption as a symbolic act, to Fournier's

(1998) emotional branding framework, logos have been viewed as essential tools through which consumers express their identity, tell their personal stories, and signal social belonging. However, our findings suggest a notable reversal of this assumption: logos are not seen as enabling self-expression, but as distorting it.

The review of the literature highlights the symbolic dimension of branding as fundamentally shaped by the early work of Sidney Levy (1959). As Levy posits, branded products derive value not only from their utility, but from the meanings embedded within them. Meanings that are shaped by cultural context and personal identity. However, our empirical findings strongly challenge this assertion, particularly Levy's claim that, "people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (Levy, 1959, p. 118). While consumption may indeed be inherently symbolic, and visible brands did function as instruments for expressing values and social belonging in the early stage of adolescence, our participants' motivations reveal a different dynamic now. Specifically, participants emphasized that visible brands do not hold particular value for them. When discussing external perceptions, brands were mentioned as a distracting, misleading influence. Instead, respondents preferred to be evaluated based on their personality and styling.

Fournier (1998) extends the symbolic perspective by arguing that consumers form enduring attachments to brands, encompassing emotional bonds and personal narratives. According to him, brands, through repeated engagement, become symbolic anchors for memory and self-concept. Therefore, logos, slogans, and packaging evoke chapters of life, identity aspirations, and emotional resonance (Fournier, 1998). However, our data reveal a significant divergence from this perspective, particularly through the motive of maturity. While participants acknowledged that brand logos were important in adolescence as a means of seeking social validation, they described a detachment from overtly displayed brands in adulthood. Personal style, rather than brand affiliation, emerged as the primary medium of self-expression. In our findings, no particular emotional attachments to brands were evident. Instead, participants expressed confidence and comfort in presenting their authentic selves without reliance on conspicuous brands as symbols of social class, personal history, or desired identity.

This detachment is further evident when examining Wang's (2023) analysis of logos as central to symbolic systems. According to him, visible logos operate as immediately recognizable signs that convey not only brand identity but also broader cultural and social meanings. Ting et al. (2017) similarly assert that visibility, placement, and prominence of logos significantly shape consumer preferences in the fashion industry. Here again, our data offer a clear counterpoint. Although we can agree on how branded visibility influences fashion choices, participants explicitly expressed a desire to avoid association with brand imagery, rather than preferring them. Respondents want to be evaluated based on individual self-expression

instead through the lens of visible branding. Participant 14 captures this position succinctly: “I feel more authentic 100%. Because you're yourself, you want to be judged based on yourself.”

This distancing from visible branding is closely tied to participants’ desire not to be reduced to or represented by a brand’s image. Several respondents articulated discomfort with acting as brand communicators or advertisements for companies from which they derive no benefit. Participant 18, again, reinforces this view: “I don’t want it if it makes me feel that I'm like a branded person, that I'm (...) a person that is the advertisement for a brand that I gain nothing from.”

On top of that, the findings from Han et al. (2010) and Ting et al. (2017) frame visible logos as markers of group belonging and taste. High-status consumers use subtle logos to signal insider status, while others rely on loud logos to be recognized. Yet our participants, despite being middle-class, expressed strong aversion to logomania, maybe even immunity, associating visible branding with mass consumption, performativity, or immaturity. Participant 18’s critique of being “a walking advertisement” further supports this symbolic rejection. Instead of overt logos acting as boundary markers that signify cultural belonging, as Han et al. claim, our participants reframe logos as noise, preferring their clothes to “speak quietly” (Participant 12). They still pursue exclusivity or selective belonging, but one based on insider recognition, and symbolic subtlety, not public visibility. Thus, the desire for symbolic distinction remains, but with the mechanism of being different: from logos-as-status, to non-logos-as-code.

As suggested by Kirmani (2009), Grubb and Grathwohl (1967), branding is not only about status acquisition but also about self-perception and social signaling. Thus, branding elements help individuals reflect their actual selves, present their ideal selves, and position themselves within aspirational groups. Escalas and Bettman (2005) and Grace and O’Cass (2002) further argue that branding functions as a performative tool in constructing social identity. However, our findings contrast with this framework as well. Particularly, the motive of maturity reveals that participants have reached a developed stage characterized by self-assurance and confidence. They no longer feel compelled to use branded visibility to express themselves or signal group belonging. Although clothing remains a key mode of self-reflection, overt branding is neither necessary nor desired by our respondents. Participants consistently emphasized a desire to be seen and judged on the basis of their behaviour, personality, and individual style, not on brand affiliations.

Above all, this is particularly evident in how our respondents express their relationship to branded items. Rather than using logos to amplify or externalize their personality, as posited by Kirmani (2009) or Escalas and Bettman (2005), participants describe logos as imposing and unwanted narratives onto them. While previous scholarship suggests that symbols and visible brand markers aid in the reflection of self, identity construction and social belonging, our study has repeatedly shown that for our respondents this was clearly not the case.

Participant 14's remark: "You first judge the brand, then the person," captures the sentiment that logos operate as pre-coded scripts, which override and overshadow the individual's own identity. This critique echoes concerns about *Symbolic Overdetermination*, in which branding becomes so culturally saturated that it replaces individuality rather than expressing it. From a personality and authenticity perspective, this shift is significant. In contrast to the mentioned literature, our data suggest that invisible branding has become the preferred strategy for preserving personal meaning. Participants want to be seen as individuals, not representatives of commercial narratives. Visible logos, once viewed as badges of belonging, are increasingly interpreted as barriers to self-authored identity. This sentiment is highlighted by Participant 15, who said: "If I wear branded clothes, then it's like I'm only wearing them because of the brand... But if I wear clothes that don't have the brand on them, that's more authentic." This directly challenges Fournier's (1998) view of brands as emotional anchors, because instead, participants display a desire to emotionally disconnect from branding in order to access authenticity.

Finally, this also contrasts with the narrative of logomania as articulated by Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2003) and Dealca et al. (2022), who describe visible logos as visual shorthand for identity, status, and emotional intimacy. While that model assumes that consumers want to visibly affiliate with a brand to feel connected or seen, our participants do the opposite. They want to ensure that they are not mistaken for what a visible logo stands for, and that they are seen on their own terms. This underscores the identified broader cultural shift, where in a landscape oversaturated with symbolic noise, invisibility has become the new distinction. Rather, the choice against branded symbols can be interpreted as a new marker for authenticity: It is a symbol not to wear symbols.

5.1.4 Visible Brand Avoidance

In our exploration of participant's underlying motives for choosing invisible brands, while avoiding visible ones, our empirical findings partly align with Klein's critique of branding. As Klein (2000) observes, "Over the past decade and a half, logos have grown so dominant that they have essentially transformed the clothing on which they appear into empty carriers for the brands they represent" (p. 35). Hence, rejecting visible branding is not only a stylistic preference but a deliberate act of resistance against the corporate appropriation of identity. Participants echoed this assumption, rejecting the notion of being subsumed under the imagery of brands. Instead, they expressed a desire to convey their authentic selves through clothing without the explicit use of visible brands.

These findings are further substantiated by the work of Lee et al. (2009) and Pangakar et al. (2021), who identify several drivers of brand avoidance, such as symbolic rejection, ideological resistance, and ethical concerns. According to them, the preference for invisible branding reflects a proactive identity management strategy, one in which individuals assert autonomy and resist the conformist pressures of mass-market branding. Although participants

did not exhibit explicit resistance to prevailing ideological structures, respondents expressed a shared desire to avoid being associated with the symbolic meanings ascribed to brands, as such associations influence how they are perceived by others, thereby performing active impression management. In presenting themselves without branded signifiers, participants aimed to convey a more authentic and unmediated identity.

Additionally, several participants highlighted the growing importance of sustainability, demonstrating a preference for durable clothing and consistent personal style. Consequently, these findings are in alignment with the work of Lee et al. (2009) and Pangakar et al. (2021). To add to that, in contrast to Klein's (2000) conceptualization of logo rejection as a political resistance to corporate colonization of identity, our participants, again, rarely frame their choices in ideological terms. Instead, they often described their decision to avoid logos as a matter of authenticity, individuality, and aesthetic control. For them, the issue is not explicitly of corporate power, but the risk of being misread or oversimplified by an external brand narrative.

While our findings illustrate the contemporary shift from loud branding to quiet branding, they also show that it is not a phenomenon restricted to the financially and culturally affluent. Since our participants represent the average middle-class consumer, we can suggest that inconspicuous consumption and the motives behind choosing invisible brands are not limited to the upper-class. This adds a significant dimension to Han et al.'s (2010) claim that the wealthy use subtle branding to signal status within high-cultural-capital circles. Our data suggests that middle-class consumers, too, participate in this coded form of distinction, relying on brand invisibility as a means of self-expression and peer-based recognition, not necessarily wealth.

Additionally, while the concept of brand avoidance, as developed by Lee et al. (2009), appears in several participant accounts, such as Participant 14's statement: "I don't like branded clothes," our findings show that this avoidance is more nuanced than a simple rejection of visible corporate affiliation. Participant 17, for example, still intentionally chooses specific invisible brands to signal group belonging, explaining: "If you go around wearing (...) a hoodie and everyone knows that that hoodie is from that brand, but it's not clearly from that brand, it's like an insider knowledge that if you're lucky enough to know, then you understand." In this case, they avoid overt branding but still care about the company that produced the item, because it is part of their cultural and social environment. This shows, while the concept of brand avoidance is applicable to many of our participants, we can identify the emergence of a different concept, which we term *Visible Brand Avoidance*: A strategic rejection of overt logos in favor of invisible branding that enables more precise control over how identity is communicated and perceived.

Altogether, while our participants exhibit behaviours consistent with brand avoidance and inconspicuous consumption, their motivations challenge existing theoretical frameworks.

They are not rejecting branded visibility per se, but renegotiating how brands appear. They choose to strip away their most visible symbols to regain control over self-expression, signal exclusivity within their peer group in a democratic way, and preserve a sense of authenticity in a saturated branding environment.

5.2 Dress to Express - Not Impress

This study is set out to explore why identity is expressed through branding practices outside the traditional focus of visible, luxury-oriented consumption. Rooted in the frameworks of Consumer Culture Theory, prior literature has emphasized conspicuous branding and material signaling as key mechanisms of identity performance and social distinction. However, we questioned whether these frameworks adequately account for more subtle and alternative branding strategies, particularly as practiced by middle-class consumers. By focusing on this underexplored consumer segment, the study aimed to extend Consumer Culture Theory beyond its conventional emphasis on conspicuous branding and luxury consumption.

Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty middle-class participants, our research reveals that branding continues to play a central role in identity construction, but in a form largely overlooked by existing scholarship. The findings demonstrate that visible branding is often actively avoided, not due to indifference or disengagement, but because it is perceived as a source of immediate judgment, misperception, and distortion. Participants expressed a clear concern that visible logos send the wrong message, misaligning with their personal style, character, and values. Far from being superficial choices, their preference for invisibly branded fashion reflects a deeper rejection of being reduced to a mass-market identity, or becoming a de facto ambassador for a brand whose narrative does not align with their own. The visibility of logos, rather than enhancing self-expression, was described as a distraction that threatens to overshadow individuality, dilute authenticity, and simplify complex identities into pre-coded assumptions.

Participants articulated a variety of interconnected motives for this preference. A significant driver was maturity, as many respondents described a developmental shift away from the desire for overt social validation toward a more internally anchored and authentic representation of self. This maturity was closely tied to a growing emphasis on personality expression, with participants preferring to be recognized for their individual style rather than for brand affiliations. Many respondents described reaching a phase of life where they no longer felt pressure to conform to peer expectations or prove belonging through logos. They no longer needed visible branding to fit in, felt grounded in their sense of self, and chose to communicate identity through more intentional, nuanced means. This rejection of visible branding was often framed as an expression of authenticity, self-assurance, and resistance to social pressure, rather than rebellion.

Additionally, the preference for invisible branding was often associated with a subtle form of exclusivity. Rather than aiming for mass recognition, participants valued the ability to signal belonging to a culturally literate peer group through understated choices, indicating that symbolic literacy has become a more refined form of distinction than overt brand display. This was further supported by the finding that many participants consciously managed how they were perceived, using minimalistic fashion as a means of curating social impressions. In this context, the absence of branding was not a rejection of communication, but a tool for precision in symbolic expression.

By uncovering these underlying motives of maturity, expression of authenticity, signaling exclusivity, and perception management, the study has provided a comprehensive answer to the research question. It reveals that invisible branding functions not as a void of meaning, but as a site of intentional identity expression. As a result, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how branding, even when unseen, continues to shape the way middle-class consumers define and communicate who they are.

Through personal styling, aesthetic coherence, and subtle signaling, these consumers express values such as authenticity, symbolic literacy, and aesthetic autonomy, positioning themselves within socially aware, culturally fluent peer groups. In this light, our study expands the boundaries of Consumer Culture Theory by introducing a form of symbolic consumption that operates beneath the surface of conspicuousness. While traditional theories have privileged the semiotics of visibility and luxury as sites of social distinction, our data illustrate that meaning is also forged through omission, restraint, and quiet legibility. Identity here is not shouted through status symbols but whispered through codes, perceptible only to those with shared symbolic literacy.

Thus, we extend Consumer Culture Theory by introducing a form of symbolic consumption that operates without overt brand markers. Our findings challenge the assumption that identity expression requires visible branding, revealing instead that invisibility can itself be a powerful symbolic resource. Middle-class consumers are not passive replicators of elite fashion behaviours, but active agents of symbolic distinction who redefine belonging through curated understatement rather than conspicuous display. To summarize, this study contributes to a broader cultural understanding of how branding is evolving: from a dominant language of visual display to a more interpretive, self-authored, and selectively legible mode of self-expression.

5.3 Practical Implications

Our theoretical findings in this study not only challenge existing literature within the field of Consumer Culture Theory but also carry significant practical implications. For further elaboration, we differentiate between three key dimensions: the consumer, marketing professionals, and broader market dynamics.

From a consumer perspective, this study contributes to enhanced consumer awareness and education. By critically engaging with participants' purchasing behaviours, motivations, and perspectives, we observed that many participants had not previously reflected on the underlying drivers of their consumption choices. When prompted with questions related to their purchasing behaviour, self-expression, and decision-making, participants became more consciously aware of social and cultural dynamics that had previously remained unexamined or only vaguely understood. The shift from prominently branded, mass-market fashion towards more subtle, invisible branding represents a departure from conventional consumption patterns. Gaining insight into their own motivations for this shift enables consumers not only to make more informed choices aligned with personal benefits but also to adopt a broader social perspective, questioning dominant consumerist models and asserting greater autonomy in clothing choices that resist capitalist-driven market pressures.

In line with our findings, we investigated self-expression through the avoidance of visible branding. This supports the notion of an ongoing cultural shift in fashion, whereby the preference for subtle, invisible branding, once associated primarily with luxury consumer segments, is increasingly evident among middle-class consumers. Consequently, the findings offer validation and recognition to consumers for their self-expression practices. What initially appeared to be a niche trend, invisible branding as a counterpoint to the mainstream now emerges as part of a broader, evolving social movement that enables consumers to affiliate with a new form of symbolic social class.

From a marketing standpoint, a deeper understanding of contemporary consumer behaviour is especially relevant. Marketers can leverage these insights to better address the growing demographic of middle-class consumers who reject overt branding in favor of subtlety and discretion. To effectively reach this audience, both marketing and brand management strategies must be adapted. Our primary research provides valuable insights into this target group's motivations, desires, perspectives, and needs, contributing to a more nuanced and responsive marketing communication.

On the broader level of market dynamics, the investigated consumer behaviour of self-expression through invisible branding points toward a broader transformation within the fashion industry. Although middle-class consumers favoring invisible branding may currently represent a minority, the trend is significant enough to justify renewed market attention. Not only does this shift promote greater diversity within the fashion market, but it also encourages more ethical branding practices, focussing on authenticity, individuality, and character over mass appeal and pre-constructed brand images.

5.4 Future Research

While this study offers practical implications, it also highlights further avenues for future research. First, to support scholarly inquiry, it is essential to consider the increasing cultural

shift towards minimalism, understatement, and subtle forms of clothing. This shift appears to extend beyond a transient trend, suggesting a more enduring transformation in consumer behaviour, one that affects not only luxury consumers but also those within the middle class. Closely associated with this cultural movement is the growing emphasis on sustainability. In an era where the consequences of climate change are increasingly visible, investigating the potential link between minimalism, brand invisibility, and sustainable fashion practices emerges as both a logical and necessary direction for further research.

Moreover, this qualitative study recommends expanding the sample size for future interviews, as this research is limited to twenty narratives. Thus, collecting additional data from middle-class consumers who deliberately avoid overt branding could yield richer perspectives and a broader range of insights. Expanded research might also explore the relationship between absent branding and self-expression across varying social, economic, and cultural contexts. For instance, incorporating perspectives from lower-income consumers could deepen our understanding of the motivations and values underlying their clothing choices.

Furthermore, as this study has demonstrated that self-expression through branding changes over time, future research could further investigate generational differences in fashion consumption. A comparative analysis of multiple participants across different age groups may reveal how varying stages of maturity influence consumers' brand perception.

Given that the current study focuses solely on participants from Western Cultures, extending the research to include individuals from non-Western contexts would enhance the cultural diversity of the sample and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

In addition, future research could extend beyond the domain of fashion to explore other areas of consumption, such as the automobile industry or consumer electronics, where branding likewise plays a central role in identity construction. Investigating whether similar patterns of visible brand avoidance and symbolic subtlety emerge in these categories would offer valuable comparative insights and test the generalizability of our findings across other fields of consumption.

As the present study explores self-expression through invisible branding, another promising area for future research might involve individuals with visual impairments. For such individuals, self-expression may naturally be shaped by elements of invisibility. This does not imply a lack of self-expression, nor does it negate the communicative function of clothing. Rather, examining how identity is expressed among individuals with visual impairments may yield valuable insights into the broader dynamics of self-presentation and non-verbal communication in the field of invisibility.

Additionally, individuals in professions requiring work uniforms, such as nurses, pilots, doctors, military personnel, or even school students, represent another relevant group for

future study. In these contexts, where personal style is restricted by standardized attire, it would be worthwhile to explore alternative modes of self-expression. Understanding how identity is communicated in the absence of personalized clothing may shed light on the multifaceted ways individuals convey a sense of self.

Finally, examining self-expression in non-capitalist societies, such as tribal communities unaffected by mass-market consumer dynamics, presents a compelling research opportunity. In such settings, where overt branding is naturally absent, it would be insightful to investigate how individuals communicate identity, social status, and belonging. These insights could significantly enrich the broader discourse on self-expression and cultural variation in consumer behaviour.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This study critically examines why middle-class consumers express identity through the avoidance of visible branding, challenging prevailing assumptions within traditional Consumer Culture Theory that privileges conspicuously branded fashion consumption and luxury symbols.

Based on in-depth interviews with twenty middle-class participants, this study demonstrates that branding continues to play a central role in self-expression, however in a more nuanced manner than traditionally acknowledged. Rather than rejecting brands outright, participants engage in active *Visible Brand Avoidance*: a deliberate rejection of overt logos in favor of more subtle branding that affords them greater control over self-presentation and impression management.

Firstly, one significant motivation for visible brand avoidance is the attainment of a more mature stage of self. In contrast to their adolescent years, characterized by insecurity and a reliance on conspicuous branding as a means of gaining social acceptance, participants now exhibit a more developed sense of self. This maturity is accompanied by increased confidence and a heightened resistance to social pressures and mainstream fashion norms.

Furthermore, the research identifies the expression of authenticity as a key driver behind brand avoidance. Participants deliberately reject conspicuous branding in order to convey their genuine selves, emphasizing individuality and character over brand-driven appearances. In doing so, they seek to maintain an authentic image that is not overshadowed or distorted by prominent commercial symbols.

Additionally, the study reveals that participants employ brand avoidance as a strategy for signaling exclusivity. By consciously selecting clothing with minimal or invisible branding, they align themselves with a form of democratic exclusivity, an affiliation with an informed, discerning social group that resists overt brand imagery.

Finally, by avoiding visibly branded fashion, respondents are in control of their perception, the fourth uncovered motive of visible brand avoidance. Through individual choices in styling, aesthetic coherence, and personal expression, respondents articulate values such as authenticity, symbolic literacy, and aesthetic autonomy. Rather than leaving control to overt brand displays, they maintain their identity by allowing their personal aesthetic to communicate on their behalf.

This study's findings challenge traditional Consumer Culture Theory's emphasis on conspicuous consumption by revealing a quieter, more coded form of distinction, where identity is expressed through restraint and subtlety rather than overt status symbols. The findings extend theoretical understandings of symbolic consumption by foregrounding the expressive potential of invisibility. Practical implications include consumer empowerment, adjusting marketing strategies, and evolving fashion market dynamics, indicating a broader cultural shift toward minimalism and selective legibility in branding. Future research is encouraged to deepen and diversify these insights through larger, cross-cultural, and context-specific studies, including groups such as uniformed professionals and students, visually impaired individuals, and non-capitalist societies. Ultimately, this research highlights that branding, even when invisible to the public eye, remains a powerful medium through which middle-class consumers express identity and negotiate social meaning.

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Appendix A

The Motive of Articulated Maturity

Motive	Quote
Articulated Maturity	I cared a lot more if something was branded back when I was a teenager and in school because wearing brands was necessary to be cool. I started caring less when I turned 22 I think, because I didn't pressure myself to impress other people with clothes and started to just think about that stuff for myself. (Participant 1) Of course, there was a time when I was a teenager, we all had to deal with a lot of insecurities and then this would have helped. (Participant 4) When I was a teenager, I just wanted to have that one trendy piece (Participant 8) Dude, in high school, when everybody was wearing that freaking Hollister stuff. That's where they got me. I do have to say. That's where they got me. I wanted to be part of the game. I think I've done a good job at overcoming that. (Participant 15) Right now, when you're older, and you don't really care. It's more about the style itself than about the brand of the items. Like when I look at people, I don't see the brands, especially. But I see personal style. (Participant 17) At this point in my life, I don't care too much anymore. I just try what I feel like that looks good. (Participant 18) I think back then it was really related to the status symbol for me. But now, I think at this point I would say I don't care about it to have those status symbols. I actually think it's a bit tacky at this point of my life, very personally speaking. (Participant 20)
Growing Confidence	They are not influencing my fashion choices, but of course there is a certain amount of judgment. But I don't change anything based on that. (Participant 4) No, I stand by my style. (Participant 6) Primarily, my own opinion matters most. I have to feel good in what I wear. But I do consider the opinion of the person I shop with, their perspective is helpful, though the final decision is mine. (Participant 7). I think it sends the message that they don't want a brand name to tell about themselves. And they trust on their taste. Because they can show that they have a good style without the help of a brand name behind it. And it just shows they don't care about brands. Just care about what matters. (Participant 14)

	But I don't think I care. Like, I don't care as long as I'm comfortable and I like what I'm wearing out there. (Participant 15) But I would say it helped my confidence and just figuring out what I like and being able to focus on what I like is most important (Participant 19)
Resisting norms and social pressure	I didn't pressure myself to impress other people with clothes, and started to just think about that stuff for myself. (Participant 1) Many people feel a lot of pressure regarding their choice of clothes. This is not good but unfortunately, that's the way the modern world and especially social media works nowadays. (Participant 3) So, yeah, that's when I started, like, Okay, should I? Should I not? And then I decided, no, I shouldn't go with it. (Participant 11) This is where I draw the line. I think this is where people who would like brands and flashy stuff wear those to impress others, and people who don't care wear the clothes they are wearing because they like them. (Participant 15) So to me, I like to think that I'm a person who sees through the clothing. (Participant 16)

The Motive of Expression of Authenticity

Motive	Quote
Expression of Authenticity	I am sure that there are many people, like me, who wear non-branded clothes to make sure the clothes don't distract from the characteristics a person has. (Participant 3) I find these people more interesting because the logo doesn't distract from their personality. (Participant 10) You first judge the brand, then the person. (Participant 14) They don't want a brand name to tell them about themselves. (Participant 14) I don't want it if it makes me feel that I'm like a branded person. (Participant 18) As I said before, the way I dress is the way I am or the way I identify myself. (Participant 3) This way I can express who I am. (Participant 4) With the possibility of individually choosing what you want to wear, everyone can express their own personality. (Participant 6) It's an important part of me to show who I am. (Participant 11)

	When you wear super branded clothes, people tend to pay more attention to what you're wearing than to yourself. (Participant 13) I'm very laid back in the way I dress and I think that's like something that is also my personality. A way to show the outside world a glimpse of my personality. (Participant 15) It feels authentic to my personality and I think it communicates cohesiveness for me. (Participant 20) In the end, I want to feel comfortable and authentic in the way I feel. If I personally feel authentic and confident, I express that to my environment and that is how they see me then. (Participant 4) I can dress in invisible clothing in every detail according to my person and thus express even more authenticity. (Participant 6) I perceive myself as more authentic, definitely. (Participant 13) I feel more authentic 100%. (Participant 14) Clothes with big logos feel quite boring and mainstream to me. (Participant 19) Yes, I feel more authentic because the identity in branded clothes it's just in the brand. (Participant 19)
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The Motive of Signaling Exclusivity

Motive	Quote
Signaling Exclusivity	I can wear a very good brand, but it just does not need to be shown on the outside of the clothes. (Participant 8) Those who know can recognize the brand even without a logo, so there's a certain exclusivity in that. (Participant 10) I think suits were a really good example. Let's not give any brand, but you can see a good suit and a bad suit without seeing the brand on it. I think that's how unbranded brands carry their value to society. (Participant 14) If you find someone that recognizes it, that indicates to you that it's part of your same special private club. That's the message the non branded brands are sending and it's also about discretion. (Participant 18) Things that you don't recognize unless you know and you see it. (Participant 18) You have to have a very trained eye to see that it's a very niche thing. (Participant 20)

The Motive of Control of Perception

Motive	Quote
Control of Perception	I would rather be perceived by the way I act or at least by the way the fashion looks like itself than by the brands that are printed on the fashion items. (Participant 2) Brands are connected with a certain image. Displaying them will lead to provoking a perception of myself in others based on that image. Yes, because it contributes better to the image I have of myself than wearing branded clothes. (Participant 2) I do want people around me to like me, but my style or my fashion choices should not play too much of a role for that. (Participant 3) I think this is a generational dilemma. Gen Z for me is this individualism, free spirit. I feel like I'm more on the millennial side, I care about it a lot and ask myself: How am I perceived by others? I do care about that. (Participant 8) I want to show, both in the way that I act, but also the way that I dress, that I'm nice and welcoming. (Participant 11) I think I want people to judge my outfit if it looks good or bad. But I don't want the brand to play a role. (Participant 14) I think people that do care about brands care more about what other people think, really. (Participant 15) I don't want it if it makes me feel that I'm like a branded person, that I'm kind of a, I don't know. I'm a person that is the advertisement for a brand that I gain nothing from. (Participant 18) But obviously it's more about your personality. I have lots of friends with super boring fashion sense, but they are the best people in the world. But I mean everyone is judging the book by its cover often, so we always get a first impression and I would like that to be a good one. So yeah, I would say it's kind of important for me. (Participant 19)

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. What are reasons for you to avoid buying branded fashion items?
2. How do you emphasize/display/express certain aspects of yourself?
3. How do you choose what clothes to buy and wear? What is important to you?
4. Do you believe that your fashion choices contribute to how you want to express yourself?
5. Do you think fashion is an important part of who you are? If yes, why?
 - a. *How do you think the way we dress helps to show and shape who we are?*
6. Why do you choose invisible brands?
 - a. *Do you believe that branded clothes are more effective when it comes to building an image of oneself than invisible brands?*
 - b. *What messages do you think invisibly branded clothes send about a person?*
 - c. *How does your clothing help you feel connected to certain groups or communities, even without explicit branding?*
7. When did you start caring about whether or not something is branded? Was there a turning point or a specific influence?
8. How do people around you (friends, family, peers) perceive your fashion choices?
 - a. *Does that influence your decisions?*
9. Do you feel more authentic when wearing non-branded clothes? Why or why not?
10. Do you ever feel pressure to wear branded items? If so, from where?
11. How do you research or discover invisible brands? What do you look for?
12. Do you think people dress and present themselves more to reflect who they truly are, or to shape how others perceive them? Why?

Declaration of AI Use

In compliance with the Lund University School of Economics' guidelines and policies on the use of AI tools in academic work, we hereby declare that we used large language models, such as ChatGPT by OpenAI, solely for permitted purposes in the development of this Master's thesis. These uses were limited to improving the clarity and readability of our language, exploring possible ideas during the early stages of brainstorming, receiving advice and feedback on structure, and summarizing background material to enhance understanding.

Additionally, it helped to keep proper source formatting in regard to the reference list. At no point was AI used to determine or justify the choice of topic or theoretical framework, conduct or inform the analysis, or draw conclusions. All core academic content, such as the selection of theories, methodological decisions, analytical work, and final interpretations, was developed independently. We understand that copying AI-generated output is not permitted and have strictly adhered to this rule. Lastly, we saved all prompts in case for follow-up questions by the examiner.