

The Imperfect Aesthetic: Gen Z Negotiating Identity through Retro Digital Technologies in a Hyper-Digital Age

by

Kiren Debipersad and Adriana Pavlova

May 2026

Master's Programme in International Marketing and Brand
Management

Supervisor: Carys Egan-Wyer
Examiner: Jon Bertilsson
Wordcount: 21 823

Abstract

This thesis explores Gen Z's use of compact digital cameras in a hyper-digital age. While previous research on nostalgic consumption has largely focused on analogue technologies and material artefacts such as vinyl records and film photography, less attention has been given to retro digital devices that imitate analogue aesthetics while remaining fully digital.

Using a qualitative approach, this study draws on semi-structured interviews with Gen Z digicam users in Europe. The analysis is based on two theories: Belk's concept of the Extended Self and Goffman's framework of self-presentation.

The findings suggest that the compact digital cameras from the early 2000s, which are the focus of this research, function not merely as tools for documentation, but as symbolic devices through which Gen Z constructs and performs identity. Participants associated them with authenticity, intentionality, nostalgia, and presence in contrast to hyper-digital smartphone culture. Despite remaining fully digital, the compact digital cameras were experienced through logics traditionally associated with analogue media, such as aura, imperfection, and emotional meaning.

This thesis contributes to the literature on nostalgic consumption and Consumer Culture Theory by demonstrating how authenticity, nostalgia, and identity construction may emerge through retro digital objects occupying an ambiguous position between analogue nostalgia and contemporary digital culture.

Keywords: nostalgic consumption, Gen Z, digicams, identity construction, Instagram, imperfect aesthetic, retro media.

Acknowledgements

We would like to sincerely thank our supervisor, Carys Egan-Wyer, for the support, thoughtful guidance, and insightful feedback provided throughout this thesis journey. Her comments consistently helped us strengthen our ideas and shape the thesis into a more coherent and connected piece of work. Beyond the academic guidance, her positive energy and engaging supervision sessions made the entire process genuinely enjoyable.

In addition, we are grateful to everyone who took part in this study and openly shared their experiences and perspectives. Their willingness to contribute played an essential role in making this research possible.

We would also like to thank our families, friends, and peers for their continuous support throughout this thesis journey. Their encouragement meant a great deal to us during this process.

Lund, Sweden

31st of May 2026

Adriana Pavlova

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Adriana Pavlova', written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Kiren Debipersad

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Kiren Debipersad', written in a stylized, cursive style.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Relevance	2
1.3 Research Purpose and Research Question	3
1.4 Outline of the thesis	4
2 Literature Review	6
2.1 The mystery of the return of retro tools	6
2.2 Drivers of retro tools usage	6
2.3 Retro Camera Practices: Defining the cameras and the act	7
2.4 The digital camera is an example of...	8
2.5 The trend of “Slowing Down”	9
2.6 Nostalgia	9
2.6.1 Nostalgia and consumer behaviour	9
2.6.2 Marketing and the past	10
2.7 The Imperfect Aesthetic	11
2.8 Instagram as a platform for identity performance	12
3 Theoretical framework	14
3.1 Belk’s Extended Self	14
3.2 Goffman and the Presentation of Identity	16
4 Methods	18
4.1 Research design	18
4.2 Research strategy and approach	19
4.3 Research setting and context	20
4.4 Data collection	20
4.4.1 Type of data	20
4.4.2 Semi-structured interviews	20
4.4.3 Interview guide	22
4.5 Sampling	23
4.6 Data analysis	24
4.7 Quality criteria	26
4.7.1 Authenticity	26
4.7.2 Plausibility	26
4.7.3 Criticality	27
4.7.4 Trustworthiness: credibility	27
4.7.5 Trustworthiness: transferability	27
4.7.6 Trustworthiness: dependability	28
4.7.7 Trustworthiness: confirmability	28

4.8 Ethical considerations	29
4.9 Reflexivity	30
4.10 Limitations	30
5 Findings and analysis	32
5.1 Digital Cameras as Identity Objects	32
5.1.1 The camera as a heirloom and a memory object	33
5.1.2 The camera as part of the identity-kit	34
5.1.3 Collecting memories and rematerialising the digital	35
5.1.4 Theme summary	36
5.2 The Search for Imperfection, Presence, and Authenticity	37
5.2.1 The imperfect aesthetic and the search for aura	37
5.2.2 Presence in the moment and the paradox of digital slowness	38
5.2.3 Theme summary	40
5.3 Negotiating Between Analogue Nostalgia and Digital Convenience	41
5.3.1 A separate device - a different meaning	41
5.3.2 Rejecting full analogue inconvenience	42
5.3.3 Theme summary	43
5.4 Performing the Imperfect Self on Instagram	43
5.4.1 Curating the Self on the Instagram Front Stage	43
5.4.2 The Backstage Labour	45
5.4.3 Signalling distinction through the visible digicam aesthetic	47
5.4.4 Theme summary	47
6 Discussion	48
6.1 Summary of the findings	48
6.2 Beyond the digicam: the broader phenomenon	49
6.3 Theoretical contributions	50
6.4 Practical implications	55
7. Conclusion	56
References	58
Appendix A: Declaration of AI use	63
Appendix B: Interview Guide (Pilot interviews)	64
Appendix C: Interview Guide (Main interviews)	67

1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background of the study and presents the problematization within the research area. Furthermore, the purpose of the thesis, research question and thesis outline are presented. Parts marked with an asterisk are taken from the mock study in the BUSR33 course.

1.1 Background

Back in December, we attended a student gathering in Lund with fellow students and friends. During the evening, one of the girls at the table took out her camera and asked everyone to take a picture together as a memory. After taking several more pictures throughout the evening, we approached her and asked if she could send us the photographs. Surprisingly, she explained that she could not. The camera she used, called “Flashback”, was a fully digital camera designed by an Australian start-up to imitate analogue photography through blurry images, faded colours, visible flash, and low-quality images. However, the imitation extended beyond the aesthetic alone. Similar to analogue film cameras, users could only take 27 photographs before the “roll” needed to be reloaded through an app, and most surprisingly, the images remained locked for 24 hours before becoming available. Only after this waiting period would the user receive a notification that the photographs were “ready”. For us, this meant that we could not get our pictures at the moment, not on the same day, not even in the same week.

From a purely technological perspective, this behaviour appeared irrational. In a world where smartphones already provide unlimited, instant, and high-resolution photography within seconds, why would young consumers voluntarily wait an entire day for lower-quality digital images? The situation left us discussing the phenomenon for the rest of the evening.

Since that night, we began noticing the practice everywhere around us in Lund. At almost every event, Gen Z consumers carried compact digital cameras from the early 2000s alongside their mobile phones. Throughout this thesis, these cameras will be referred to as “digicams” for the sake of simplicity. We started noticing that these users, but also influencers, posted their digicam pictures on Instagram. These images were highly distinctive through their low quality, blur, visible flash, faded colours, and overall imperfect appearance, standing in strong contrast to the polished and highly curated imagery typically associated with smartphone photography and social media culture. Gradually, it became clear that this

was not simply an isolated trend within our immediate social environment, but part of a much broader cultural phenomenon. Experiencing this bizarre case back in December, together with repeatedly observing similar practices afterwards, sparked our curiosity as students of consumer culture and consumption. It motivated us to explore more deeply what this phenomenon represents and why younger consumers are increasingly drawn toward technologies that appear technically inferior to the devices that they already carry every day, ultimately forming the foundation of this research. While the 'Flashback' camera represents a modern startup instantiation of this desire, it led us to discover that young consumers are overwhelmingly turning to original, legacy point-and-shoot digicams from the early 2000s to achieve this exact experience natively.

With current social media practices, there is a noticeable trend in which Gen Z uses retro digital cameras to create and share content on Instagram* (Huang, 2023). Business Insider (Dodgson, 2024) even indicated that digital cameras are projected to grow by 1.4 billion dollars until 2028 as Generation Z promotes and uses digital cameras on social media platforms. The popularity forms part of a broader revival of “retro media” including vinyl records, analogue photography, brick mobile phones, and other older media technologies (Magaudde and Minniti, 2019). Business Insider (Dodgson, 2024) describes retro digital cameras as “quiet status symbols” among younger consumers, while Ungdomsbarometeren (2025) links the popularity of single-purpose devices to desires for more conscious and intentional forms of technology use. As a result, taking pictures becomes less about documentation and more about communication and meaning-making (Huang, 2023; Kurian, 2026). This shift also has important implications for identity construction, as images are not merely reflective of the self but actively participate in shaping it. What initially appeared to be a passing aesthetic trend gradually revealed itself as part of a broader cultural phenomenon surrounding nostalgia, authenticity, identity construction, and resistance toward hyper-digital smartphone culture. More specifically, the phenomenon highlighted a paradox in contemporary consumer culture, where younger consumers increasingly embrace technologies that appear technically inferior, slower, and less efficient than the digital devices already embedded within everyday life.

1.2 Relevance

This phenomenon reflects several broader developments within contemporary consumer culture. First, it reflects nostalgic consumption, where consumers engage with products, aesthetics, and practices associated with idealised versions of the past (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019; Dam, Hartmann and Brunk, 2024). Previous research suggests that nostalgia may help consumers restore feelings of continuity, ease concerns and uncertainties about the future and create enchantment within contemporary life (Davis, 1979; Hartmann and Brunk, 2019). Second, the phenomenon reflects a broader movement of technological deceleration and resistance toward the “culture of speed” characterising hyper-digital environments (Husemann

and Eckhardt, 2018; Zhu, 2025). Third, it connects to the popularity of the “imperfect aesthetic,” where deliberate imperfections and signs of decay and “aura” become valued in contrast to the perceived perfection of contemporary digital imagery (Niemeyer, 2014). Finally, the phenomenon is closely connected to Instagram identity performance, where aesthetics, nostalgia, and retro media practices become integrated into processes of self-presentation and cultural distinction online (Zhong and Wu, 2023; Frei and Ulloa, 2025).

1.3 Research Purpose and Research Question

Existing research on retro consumption has largely focused on analogue technologies and physical artefacts such as vinyl records, film cameras, and analogue synthesisers (Beverland, Fernandez and Eckhardt, 2024; Zhu, 2025). What we know from this literature is that consumers increasingly seek to be “mindful” and “present” through the use of a single-focus device dedicated to their interest, agency and mastery of these older technologies. However, what remains less understood is why Gen Z consumers would seek these same experiences through fully digital devices that merely imitate analogue aesthetics and limitations. In this sense, digicams occupy a particularly unusual middle ground position: they are neither fully analogue nor fully modern, neither fully material nor fully immaterial.

Unlike vinyl records or film photography, the digicam produces fully digital images that lack the physical materiality traditionally associated with aura, nostalgia, and emotional attachment. Nevertheless, Gen Z consumers continue to experience these photographs as authentic, meaningful, emotionally rich, and nostalgic. Existing literature therefore leaves an important question insufficiently explored:

"How can we understand Gen Z's use of compact digital cameras?"

Against this backdrop, this thesis aims to explore how Gen Z uses digicams as tools for identity construction in a hyper-digital age. More specifically, the thesis investigates how nostalgic consumption, imperfect aesthetics, technological deceleration, and Instagram identity performance become negotiated through the use of digicams. Theoretically, the thesis draws primarily on Belk's (1988; 2013) concept of the Extended Self and Goffman's (1959) framework of self-presentation to understand how retro digital camera practices become embedded within contemporary identity construction processes. We argue that understanding the phenomenon as a part of identity construction helps explain why Gen Z consumers voluntarily adopt technologies that appear inefficient, outdated, and technically inferior.

Empirically, the study draws on a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with Gen Z users of digicams. By focusing on retro digital technologies rather than fully analogue objects, the thesis contributes to existing literature on nostalgic consumption, retro media practices, and Consumer Culture Theory by demonstrating how authenticity, aura,

intentionality, and emotional meaning may also emerge through fully digital objects and practices. Furthermore, the findings suggest that digicams function not merely as tools for documentation, but as symbolic devices through which Gen Z constructs and curates their identity, performs nostalgic authenticity, and selectively distances certain experiences from everyday smartphone culture.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is structured into seven chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the research phenomenon, presents the background and relevance of the study, and outlines the research purpose and research question. The chapter further positions the study within broader discussions surrounding retro media consumption and contemporary digital culture.

Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on retro media consumption, nostalgic consumption, technological deceleration, the imperfect aesthetic, and Instagram as a platform for identity performance. This chapter positions digicams within broader consumer culture discussions and identifies the gaps that this thesis addresses.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework used to analyse the phenomenon. The chapter introduces Belk's concept of the Extended Self and Goffman's framework of self-presentation, which together help explain how digicams become connected to identity construction and how this identity is performed on Instagram.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach of the study. It explains the qualitative research design and approach, research setting and context, sampling strategy, semi-structured interviews, methods for data analysis, limitations, and considerations related to research quality, ethics, and reflexivity.

Chapter 5 presents the findings and analysis. The chapter is structured around the main themes that emerged from the empirical material and is interpreted in light of the literature review in Chapter 2 and the theoretical framework in Chapter 3.

Chapter 6 contains the discussion. It summarises the findings, explains how the study fits in the broader phenomenon, and presents contributions to the literature on nostalgic consumption, retro media practices, identity construction, and Consumer Culture Theory. The chapter also contains practical implications.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by returning to the research question and summarising how Gen Z's use of digicams can be understood as a practice of identity construction shaped by

nostalgia, imperfect aesthetics, technological deceleration, and Instagram performance. The study's contributions to literature on nostalgic consumption and retro media practices are mentioned, and the main limitations of the study are discussed, followed by suggestions for future research.

2 Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of existing research on retro tools and practices, technological deceleration, nostalgic consumption, the imperfect aesthetic, and identity performance relevant to understanding Gen Z's use of digicams in a hyper-digital age.

2.1 The mystery of the return of retro tools

There is a visible return of the "retro media" like vinyl records, retro cameras, brick mobile phones and others among younger generations (Magaudda and Minniti, 2019). Marked by the growth of vinyl sales surpassing the number of paid downloads in 2023, and 50% of vinyl buyers being aged under 35 years old, suggests that studying the use of old technology among digital natives is a relevant topic (Fernandez and Beverland, 2019). There is also a visible return of Polaroid cameras, film photography, letter writing, and other retro practices. The resurgence of film photography even contributed to a global colour film shortage in 2021, while Leica restarted the production of its film camera M6 that same year. Together, these developments suggest that something beyond nostalgia is driving this trend: a desire for the physical in an age of immateriality. It also reflects a broader shift in how Gen Z relates to digital technologies, in which single-purpose devices, such as cameras, help minimise distractions and encourage a more conscious approach to technology use* (Ungdomsbarometern, 2025). Our research focuses on digicams from the early 2000s and reflects a broader question of why consumers, and more specifically digitally native Gen Z consumers, are drawn toward older and more time-consuming retro technologies over their faster and more convenient digital counterparts (Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt, 2024).

2.2 Drivers of retro tools usage

Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt (2024) offer a comprehensive answer to this question by studying the analogue revival across vinyl music, film photography and analogue synthesisers. They argue that consumer work, understood not as labour exchanged for value, but as a transformative, self-fulfilling practice, is a central driver of the appeal of legacy technologies. In an era characterised by mass consumption, alienation in professional life, and the erosion of meaningful skill-building, consumers reclaim a sense of agency and identity through the acquisition and mastery of difficult analogue tools and the annoyance that comes

with it when acquiring the knowledge and skills. Notably, participants in Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt's (2024) research repeatedly use words such as "mindful", "present" and "applied effort", reflecting a shared desire for deliberateness.

However, Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt's (2024) framework has two limitations that our study directly addresses. First, all three analogue categories they examine produce a physical artefact: a vinyl record, a film print, and a synthesised sound, whereas the digicam produces a digital image not so different from the digital photograph produced by the smartphone. The material result of the act is therefore absent in our context, raising the question of whether the same motivations apply when the physical outcome is removed. Second, their study follows consumers as they deepen their technical expertise over time, focusing on advanced stages of skill development. Our research, by contrast, examines casual, non-professional users for whom the skills required are considerably lower than those demanded by analogue photography. Whether this difference in effort and skill diminishes or redirects the identity-building function of the practice is a question our study is uniquely positioned to explore.

2.3 Retro Camera Practices: Defining the cameras and the act

When discussing retro cameras, we divide them into two broad categories: analogue cameras, which require a film roll, and digicams from the early 2000s. The presence of the film roll fundamentally changes both the experience and the motives for using these cameras today, and there is extensive research examining the materiality of analogue tools as a central part of their appeal.

Analogue photography, described by Niemeyer (2014) as being "alive", functions as a counter-narrative to the digital era's instantaneousness and placelessness. Unlike digital photography, its process is inherently slow and demanding. The physical placement of the film roll, the limitations of exposure, and the delayed reveal of the final image create a multi-sensory, material experience that fosters mindfulness and presence in the moment (Zhu, 2025). Crucially, the development of physical artefacts such as prints transforms images into "memory objects" that anchor personal and collective narratives, extending the self into a tangible, physical form, a dimension absent in digital photography (Zhu, 2025).

The cameras we focus on in this study are digicams from the early 2000s. These cameras are small and easily portable, designed for simplicity of use, and do not require film rolls like analogue cameras*. They are often referred to as point-and-shoot cameras, highlighting their ease of use and accessibility for non-professional photographers. However, as they originate from the period between 2000 and 2010, their image quality is considerably lower compared to modern cameras and smartphone cameras.

Most existing research tends to categorise retro media into analogue formats, such as vinyl records, cassettes, and analogue cameras, and “new” media, including smartphones and modern digital cameras (Magaudda and Minniti, 2019). The digicams we focus on occupy an ambiguous position between these categories and, as a result, have received limited scholarly attention.

2.4 The digital camera is an example of...

Vinyl records offer one of the most extensively researched examples of this broader phenomenon. Fernandez and Beverland (2019) examine how the materiality of vinyl as a legacy technology generates passionate and intimate connections between users and their music, arguing that the physicality of the record fulfils a fundamental human desire to physically interact with objects, one that persists even among digital natives. Building on this, Whitehouse (2023) goes beyond the physical object itself to uncover the counterintuitive value of the effort involved in vinyl consumption, embedded in practices such as searching, buying, and listening to records from beginning to end. She positions these lost consumption practices as triggers of nostalgia for a seemingly idealised past.

Whitehouse (2023) contrasts the careful and mindful ritual of vinyl listening with digital music's role as a "soundtrack of everyday life" and "media noise," a distinction echoed by Fernandez and Beverland (2019), whose respondents describe vinyl as requiring active concentration compared to the passive consumption associated with streaming. Furthermore, vinyls accumulate aura through their visible imperfections, such as scratches and wear over time, giving them a sense of history and authenticity that digital music files cannot physically display (Niemeyer, 2014), while simultaneously functioning as collections that document personal life narratives (Whitehouse, 2023). Similarly, Amatulli et al. (2018) argue that vintage products are perceived as authentic because they were produced in a different era and carry the values and culture associated with that time, similar to how “a consumer may purchase vinyl records even though she grew up listening to mp3 files” (Han and Newman, 2022).

In this sense, Fernandez and Beverland (2019) position analogue tools in contrast to the expectation that the “new” is more desired and even technologically superior. Particularly relevant to our research is their finding that participants valued having a separate, single-purpose device as a way of escaping the screen, a paradox that maps closely onto our interest in carrying a dedicated digital camera despite the constant presence of the smartphone (Zhong and Wu, 2023).

2.5 The trend of “Slowing Down”

Having established this broader revival of retro technologies, we now turn to Husemann and Eckhardt’s (2018) concept of consumer deceleration. This refers to the intentional use of practices and tools that reduce speed and encourage a slower pace of consumption, reflected in trends such as slow fashion, slow travel, slow food and slow cities. Importantly, deceleration is not about doing nothing, like watching Netflix, but exactly the opposite: engaging with activities mentally and physically that deliberately slow down everyday life. Husemann and Eckhardt (2018) distinguish between embodied deceleration, technological deceleration, and episodic deceleration, positioning these practices within a much broader resistance toward the liquidity and acceleration of modern life.

To explain the need for slowing down, the authors describe contemporary life as increasingly characterised by rapid technological development, accelerated social change, and the constant speed of everyday activities (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2018). Most relevant to our research, technological deceleration is about regaining control over how technology shapes attention and everyday experiences rather than completely rejecting technology itself. The loss of such control becomes visible when individuals experience distraction through constant notifications, accessibility, and digital overstimulation. Furthermore, these practices often emphasise face-to-face interaction and presence in the moment as a counter-response to hyper-digital environments. This makes technological deceleration closely connected to practices of digital “detox”, including limiting smartphone usage, blocking applications, or temporarily turning toward older technologies (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2018). The role of digital tools as a counter-practice within a highly digitalised environment characterised by digital overload and the “culture of speed” (Zhu, 2025) has received limited scholarly attention.

2.6 Nostalgia

2.6.1 Nostalgia and consumer behaviour

First described as a nervous disease in the 19th century, nostalgia turned into an everyday word that refers to an emotion both in positive and negative connotations and involves longing for the past (Sedikides et al., 2015). Dam, Hartmann and Brunk (2024) describe it as a bittersweet, romanticised longing to go back to a time that has ceased to exist. In consumer culture literature, nostalgia can simultaneously involve a melancholic orientation toward the past and a hopeful vision of the future, making it a multifaceted phenomenon, influenced by collective memory and capable of being constructed, shaped, and activated as a market-mediated cultural resource. In this way, nostalgia is constantly being reproduced and

co-created rather than existing beforehand in consumers' thoughts (Dam, Hartmann and Brunk, 2024; Hartmann and Brunk, 2019).

According to Weingarten and Wei (2023), research shows that in recent years, nostalgia has become increasingly relevant in consumer behaviour, influencing areas such as advertising, consumption, and product preferences through feelings of social connectedness and shaping how young people interact with media (Neave, Freemantle and Lappeman, 2026). Regarding the latter, Weingarten and Wei (2023) argue that the presence of friends or family may shape the effect of nostalgia on consumer preferences, as consumption goals may differ between strong social ties and weaker ties. More specifically, this phenomenon is connected to the idea of “communal nostalgia”, whereby consumers value products linked to a collective past that they did not personally experience (Davis, 1979). Such preferences become specifically important during times of social uncertainty and social changes, such as wars and depressions (Han and Newman, 2022), personal experiences, such as a childhood memory, and broader cultural and societal changes, such as weakened community ties or globalisation (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019). Neave, Freemantle and Lappeman (2026) further introduce the concept of historical nostalgia, referring to a longing for times that precede or fall outside one's own lived experience. In this sense, the consumption of nostalgic products helps consumers to “restore, at least temporarily, a sense of sociohistoric continuity” (Davis, 1979).

Furthermore, when nostalgia in photography is approached from this communal perspective, the entire process of photographing itself becomes connected to nostalgia. Schwarz (2009) explains that, before photography became highly individualised and digitally accessible, the production and consumption of photographs often took place collectively within the family and primarily during special occasions. Photographs were stored in physical, bulky albums at home and viewed long after the documented event had taken place, encouraging temporal nostalgia (Schwarz, 2009), which is another type of nostalgia we explore and use to look at our phenomenon. It stands for the longing and recalling of earlier stages of life. Schwarz contrasts this with contemporary smartphone photography, where images are produced individually, stored in large and unordered digital databases, and increasingly used to document mundane everyday moments. As a result, contemporary photography practices less closely resemble nostalgia and the cosy narratives traditionally associated with it (Schwarz, 2009).

2.6.2 Marketing and the past

In the field of marketing and consumption, Dam, Hartmann, and Brunk (2024) explain that past-themed market offerings marked by retro, heritage, nostalgia, or vintage cues enable consumers to symbolically revisit earlier times, perceive brands as distinctive, experience enjoyment, evoke memories, construct identities, and make sense of the present and future.

We investigate nostalgia in relation to consumption because marketing scholars examining contemporary marketing and consumer phenomena increasingly engage with how the past continues to shape present-day markets and consumer culture (Dam, Hartmann and Brunk, 2024), and this thesis aims to contribute to this conversation. In this context, nostalgia is studied as a way of understanding how the past remains embedded in what and how people consume (Holt, 2002).

As outlined, feelings of dissatisfaction or disconnection in contemporary life often stimulate nostalgic responses among consumers (Dam, Hartmann and Brunk, 2024). Hartmann and Brunk (2019) provide an important foundation for understanding nostalgia, arguing that companies increasingly market products inspired by the past to create enchantment among consumers. As everyday life becomes increasingly shaped by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control (Ritzer, 2004), space for imagination, romance, and magic may diminish (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019; Brown et al., 2003). Nostalgic products therefore appeal to consumers by reintroducing these lost qualities through consumption and restoring a sense of specialness to what is normally perceived as ordinary (Ritzer, 2005). Brunk, Dagalp and Hartmann (2020) further argue that contemporary consumer culture is increasingly aestheticised through past-themed consumption, as consumers often perceive older versions of products as more tasteful and connected to the “good old days” (Brunk, Dagalp and Hartmann, 2020).

Furthermore, nostalgic market offerings may create enchantment through re-appropriation, whereby elements of the past are transformed into sources of playful, aesthetic, and hedonic engagement (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019). In this sense, the past is not approached as something to morally restore or improve the present, but rather as a ludic spectacle offering excitement, aesthetics, and unusual styles. Playful nostalgia therefore enables individuals with no lived experience of the past to engage with it symbolically (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019).

2.7 The Imperfect Aesthetic

Niemeyer (2014) discusses that as technology has reached a point of optical perfection, this has paradoxically stimulated a desire for photographic imperfection. She argues that contemporary digital culture romanticises and even fetishises analogue media, while the aesthetic of “analogue nostalgia” emerges through the digital reproduction of analogue aesthetics. This aesthetic is characterised by deliberate imperfections rather than a complete rejection of digital technologies (Niemeyer, 2014).

Niemeyer (2014) states that there is a tendency within digital and analogue media toward “imperfection”, “flaws”, and “the aura of human mistakes”, standing in contrast to ideals of digital perfection. This suggests that imperfection is perceived as inherently human, distinguishing human expression from the precision of machines. As such, the imperfect

aesthetic can be understood as a paradoxical response aimed at preserving notions of decay and contingency. Similarly, Niemeyer (2014) states that analogue and imperfect aesthetics carry the imprint of time through visible signs of decay within the physical image, resembling earlier discussions of the warmth associated with vinyl music. On top of that, she further discusses the loss of aura through technological reproducibility.

In Zhu's (2025) study, one of the participants describes film photographers as feeling more "alive" and as "having a soul" compared to digital images. This perception is linked to the embracement of imperfection and authenticity, as well as a conscious challenge to dominant digital norms. The appeal of the imperfect aesthetic can partly be attributed to the fact that these images exist in the present while simultaneously bearing visual signs associated with the past.

Another participant in Zhu's (2025) study described these physical images as "chapters of my life", further stating that they become embedded within identity and help stabilise self-narrative. An important question for our research is whether the imperfect aesthetic produced through fully digital digicams can evoke similar feelings and meanings.

Photographing the present in a way that resembles the past creates a sense of omnipresence, projecting the current moment backwards in time and replacing contemporary detachment with a more intimate and personal perception (Niemeyer, 2014). The imperfect aesthetic serves this function because emotionally charged moments call for visual imperfection: the outward appearance of the photograph reflects an inward perception of the moment, conveying feeling in ways technically perfect images cannot. In this sense, the imperfect aesthetic attempts to restore the aura that high-quality digital lenses have "polluted" (Niemeyer, 2014). Furthermore, the aesthetic performs a temporal function by distinguishing moments rich in lived experience from the passive and decontextualised flow of everyday life. By photographing meaningful moments through this lens, the imperfect aesthetic slows down time, deepens presence, and allows those moments to leave a trace (Niemeyer, 2014).

2.8 Instagram as a platform for identity performance

Finally, Zhong and Wu (2023) argue that nostalgia is a useful lens for understanding how young adults represent themselves on social media platforms and construct identity and cultural capital. With the emergence of social platforms such as Instagram, photography became embedded into the everyday framework of communication (Niemeyer, 2014). In the last decade, several platforms have lost relevance as they failed to adapt to shifting user behaviours and expectations. Instagram, however, has remained popular through continuous adaptation to consumer preferences (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin, 2020). Frei and Ulloa (2025) revealed that Instagram facilitates the construction of online identity and recognition through the deliberate selection of images, content, and behaviours that shape distinctive

forms of self-presentation. Some users even maintain multiple Instagram accounts dedicated to different aspects of identity, such as one for personal life, one for creative expression, and one for fun (Frei and Ulloa, 2025).

Similarly, Gen Z consumers nowadays have Instagram accounts for pictures taken with a digicam. One example is Julia Helm, who became an influencer through posting only digicam pictures (Instagram.com, 2017). Instagram gives people the opportunity to represent and construct a digital identity through elements such as colour palettes and aesthetics like minimalism (Frei and Ulloa, 2025). This highlights how identity on Instagram is not simply expressed, but actively constructed through ongoing processes of selection and curation. One participant in Frei and Ulloa's study (2025) explained that his Instagram profile was carefully curated to communicate both his identity and emotional experiences.

At the same time, these dynamics create pressure to maintain idealised online identities and remain aligned with rapidly changing trends, contributing to experiences of social media fatigue. Consequently, many young consumers seek more meaningful and authentic experiences through analogue and retro digital photography practices as a way of distancing themselves from mainstream social media culture. Retro cameras therefore enable Gen Z consumers to resist the fast-paced and instant-gratification culture of social media by offering a break from the highly filtered and edited imagery that dominates these platforms, while also allowing for the expression of agency (Zhong and Wu, 2023).

3 Theoretical framework

The research question of this thesis can be divided into two dimensions. First, understanding how digicams become integrated into processes of identity construction. Second, understanding how this identity is performed and curated through Instagram. To analyse these dimensions, the thesis draws primarily on Belk's (1988; 2013) concept of the Extended Self and Goffman's (1959) framework of self-presentation, with Belk focusing on possession-based identity construction and Goffman on performance, including concepts such as performance, audience, front and backstage, and impression management. Although these perspectives view identity from different angles, their combination offers a framework that effectively captures both dimensions of the research question.

3.1 Belk's Extended Self

Belk (1988) argues in *Possessions and the Extended Self* that possessions are not merely external objects, but become integrated into an individual's sense of self. As he states, individuals "regard our possessions as parts of ourselves" (Belk, 1988), meaning that our possessions form an important part of our identity. This idea builds on James (1890), who laid an important foundation for how the self is understood today: not only through the body and mind, but also through material belongings, family, friends, places, experiences, and achievements. In this sense, the boundary between "me" and "mine" becomes blurred, as objects that are perceived as "mine" can also become part of "me". Identity is therefore constructed through an ensemble of meaningful attachments extending beyond the individual self.

Thus, the objects alone do not become part of identity by themselves. Rather, identity emerges through the combination of elements which form a system of artefacts that contribute to a coherent and evolving representation of the self. This aligns with Furby's (1978) and Tuan's ideas (1984) that the degree of control individuals have over an object influences the extent to which they perceive it as their own, thereby strengthening its connection to the self. As a result, the loss of such objects is mourned as "a loss of self", accompanied by strong emotional feelings such as invasion, violation, or grief similar to losing a close relative (Belk, 1988).

Within Belk's framework, possessions function as extensions of identity because individuals invest time, effort, and attention into them. Belk describes this as the investment of "psychic

energy” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981), through which objects become meaningful and personalised. Possessions therefore become unique to the self through emotional investment and active use (Belk, 1988). This perspective helps explain why certain objects may feel irreplaceable and even comparable to heirlooms, as they anchor personal narratives and represent the Extended Self.

Belk (1988) further discusses the development of the Extended Self through early childhood, and explains that relationships with possessions are shaped socially and that the relationship between a person and an object is not merely two-way (person-object), but three-way (person-object-person). Belk further argues that adolescence represents an important stage of identity formation in which possessions may contribute to defining the self. However, not all possessions are equally important. Objects allowing for active use, control, mastery, and skill development are more likely to be incorporated into the Extended Self. This suggests that identity formation during adolescence is not only constructed through *having* possessions, but through what individuals *do* with them.

Belk (1982) also looks at the notion of collections, where identity is expressed not through single possessions but through curated sets of objects contributing to self-definition. In this sense, the evolving collections people curate help to continuously construct identity over time. Furthermore, possessions may function as status markers due to their rarity, a concept Belk (1988) draws from the work of Douglas and Isherwood (1979). This provides an additional perspective for understanding the meanings attached to possessions.

This relationship between possessions and identity also connects to Goffman’s concept of the identity-kit. In his book “*Asylums*”, Goffman introduces the idea of the identity-kit as a tool individuals use to manage themselves on the personal Front. He explains this concept by describing what happens when one’s identity-kit is stripped away during institutionalisation, resulting in a form of mortification of the self (Goffman, 1961). Belk (1988) later reinterprets Goffman’s concept within consumer culture by turning around the original idea. He describes the identity-kit as a collection of possessions individuals carry throughout everyday life in order to maintain a stable sense of self* and actively construct and project identity.

Moreover, Belk (2013), drawing on Magaudda (2011, 2012), highlights that dematerialised digital files still rely on physical accessories and devices in order to be experienced. Furthermore, Belk (2013) points out that purely digital possessions lack the “soft tactile characteristics” (Belk, 2006) and “aura” (Benjamin, 1930/1968) of material possessions. The coexistence of digicams and smartphones therefore highlights the tension between digital convenience and material forms of self-extension. Even within digital environments, identity construction therefore continues to rely on interactions with physical objects.

Belk’s later work, *Extended Self in a Digital World* (2013), expands his original concept of the Extended Self into digital environments, arguing that dematerialised possessions such as online photographs, digital collections and social media profiles became new forms of

self-extension*. Although these possessions are dematerialised, they still function as reflections of the self and can evoke similar forms of attachment (Belk, 2013). He further expands the idea of digital collections as objects of epistemic consumption. The Instagram feed may therefore be understood as a dynamic and curated collection through which identity is continuously constructed and expressed over time, which brings us to Goffman's presentation of identity.

3.2 Goffman and the Presentation of Identity

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman defines "performance" as the activities individuals undertake to influence how they are perceived by others within a particular social situation, or what Goffman refers to as the "Front Stage" (Goffman, 1959).

The Front Stage includes both the setting in which the interaction takes place and the "personal front" of the performer, consisting of appearance and manner. Appearance signals social status and identity through elements such as clothing and possessions, while manner communicates the interactional role the individual seeks to perform. For the performance to appear convincing, these elements must align and point toward the same social reality (Goffman, 1959). One particularly relevant concept for our research is Goffman's "Dramatic Realisation", through which individuals emphasise aspects of themselves that confirm the identity they wish to project while concealing inconsistent characteristics.

To maintain this idealisation, the performers (individuals) "hide" behaviours or characteristics that could disrupt the desired impression and obscure the "dirty work" behind the final presentation (Goffman, 1959). This process often sacrifices personal spontaneity in favour of maintaining a stable definition of the situation (Goffman, 1959). Within the context of Instagram, this framework is particularly relevant for understanding how identity becomes performed and curated on Instagram.

Goffman further differentiates between "Front Stage" and "Backstage". The Front Stage refers to the space in which the performance is officially presented to the audience, while the Backstage is where contradictory aspects of the self are hidden and where preparation for the performance takes place.

To maintain the performance and protect the desired impression, the audience needs to be kept outside the Backstage, where "preparation" and concealed labour take place. Even biological activities such as sleeping are relegated to Backstage spaces because they require the individual to drop the performed "mask". The Backstage therefore allows individuals to prepare their identity-kit and rehearse before presenting themselves again to the audience in an aligned and composed manner. This constant movement between the two stages requires

the repeated putting on and taking off of the “mask”, which becomes essential for the management of personal identity (Goffman, 1959).

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) reinterpret Goffman’s framework within contemporary online environments by understanding the Backstage as the offline environment and the Front Stage as the online space in which individuals present carefully curated versions of themselves to an audience. Online environments make it easier for individuals to edit, manage, and selectively perform aspects of the self due to the distance between performer and audience, thereby facilitating personal adoption. This results in a partial representation of identity and connects to Baker’s (2009) concept of a “blended identity”, whereby the offline self motivates the construction of an online self, which subsequently feeds back into offline identity in a continuous cycle.

In the context of photography practices, this cycle may become visible through stylistic choices and aesthetic decisions that are first shaped offline, then presented online, and subsequently reinforced through digital curation and audience interaction. According to Waggoner (2009) and Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), the distinction between online and offline identity may become blurred, as individuals may perceive both as equally legitimate manifestations of a single self across varying situations.

These ideas lead to one of Goffman’s most important concepts: Impression Management. This refers to the techniques individuals use to maintain a stable “role” and definition of the situation during social interaction (Goffman, 1959). However, every social interaction is inherently fragile and can be easily disturbed by, for example, “unmet gestures” which send an inappropriate impression, “scenes” which destroy the polite appearance, and “inappropriate intrusions”, which refers to the outside audience accidentally entering the Backstage. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how coherent Instagram aesthetics and identity performances are maintained through selective curation and controlled self-presentation.

4 Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological approach underpinning the research. It clarifies the key decisions made throughout the process to ensure academic rigour. The chapter begins by presenting the overall research design, strategy, and contextual setting, as well as the selection of participants and materials. It further explains the perspective adopted in this study and discusses how this has influenced the way knowledge is created and interpreted. Building on this foundation, the methods used for data collection and analysis are explained, including the analytical approach applied to interpret the empirical material, followed by the sampling strategy. Finally, the chapter critically reflects on the quality of the study by discussing criteria such as authenticity, plausibility and criticality, while also considering ethical aspects, researcher reflexivity, and the limitations associated with the chosen methodology. Parts marked with an asterisk are taken from the mock study in the BUSR33 course.

4.1 Research design

This study is grounded in the assumption that reality, truth and knowledge are not objectively given but are continuously constructed through social interaction and interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This perspective is particularly relevant to our research aim, as the study focuses on local knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) by understanding how Gen Z individuals assign meaning to the use of digicams and how this practice contributes to their identity construction.

Rather than treating the digicam as a functional or technical choice, the phenomenon is approached as a symbolic and interpretative practice, embedded in broader cultural narratives of nostalgia, authenticity and digital fatigue. This approach therefore enables us to develop our understanding of the phenomenon and gather rich data from multiple perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), particularly within the context of Instagram as a platform for identity expression.

Building on our light constructionist epistemological foundation, our study adopts an empirical phenomenology through biographical interviews, focusing on participants' lived experiences and reflective interpretations of digicam use (Moustakas, 1994). This approach enables participants to express the emotions, experiences, memories, and interpretations that shape their identity construction, allowing the phenomenon to emerge naturally (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Carson et al., 2001).

Furthermore, the research design recognises the researchers as key contributors to knowledge creation (Carson et al., 2001), as our study operates within a double hermeneutic framework in which participants interpret their own experiences, while these interpretations are subsequently analysed by the researchers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) through the theoretical lenses described in Chapter 3. This two-layered process is particularly relevant given the study's focus on identity, as it acknowledges that both participants and researchers actively contribute to the construction of knowledge. As a result, reflexivity and positionality as described by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) become critical components of the research process, since the researchers' prior knowledge and backgrounds inevitably influence the analytical process.

4.2 Research strategy and approach

Building on the foundation above, our study adopts a qualitative research strategy, as the research aims to explore how meaning and identity are constructed rather than measured. Furthermore, existing knowledge within the consumer cultural perspective of nostalgia is mainly generated through qualitative investigations of nostalgic experiences, frequently relying on interview-based methods (Dam, Hartmann and Brunk, 2024). Given that the phenomenon under investigation implies subjective experiences, symbolic meanings and identity processes around nostalgic consumption, a qualitative approach is particularly suitable for capturing the sense of people's own worlds (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) and the complexity required to address the research question.

More specifically, the study follows an abductive research approach, characterised by a continuous dialogue between empirical observations and theoretical interpretation throughout the research process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). While Belk's (1988, 2013) Extended Self framework and Goffman's ideas on performance for audiences (1959, 1961) provide initial conceptual lenses, abduction allows for a continuous dialogue between theory and data, where empirical findings may refine, extend or challenge existing theoretical assumptions.

This approach is particularly relevant given the paradox at the core of the study: despite the convenience and technological superiority of smartphones, Gen Z individuals deliberately choose digicams. Existing assumptions about efficiency, convenience, or technological superiority cannot fully explain this phenomenon, which positions the phenomenon as a "puzzle", requiring further interpretation (Bell et al., 2022). In line with abductive reasoning, the aim is to identify the most suitable explanation among competing interpretations of the data. In this way, the analysis moves towards identifying the meanings that make the phenomenon less puzzling, allowing theory and empirical insights to evolve together (Bell et al., 2022) and provide a more nuanced understanding of identity-building practices.

4.3 Research setting and context

The study is situated within the context of Gen Z consumers living in Europe who share relatively comparable social backgrounds, characterised by higher education and active engagement with contemporary digital trends. Focusing on this setting allows our research to explore how digicam use is embedded in everyday routines, social interactions and identity performances.

It is acknowledged that the findings are shaped by this specific context and thus are not statistically generalisable to all Gen Z populations. Instead, the aim is to generate relevant insights that could be useful in similar situations, which is also known as the transferability of the research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

4.4 Data collection

4.4.1 Type of data

Our study collects primary qualitative data in the form of spoken narratives gathered through interviews, which are subsequently transcribed into textual material for analysis. The data focuses on participants' lived experiences of digicam use, including how they understand and experience the practice, how meaning is attached to its aesthetic and material dimensions, and how these meanings relate to identity construction and self-presentation.* This type of data is particularly suited to answer our research question, as identity is understood as a dynamic and interpretative process that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures.*

4.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and lived experiences (Carson et al., 2001) while maintaining a level of consistency across interviews. The choice for interviews is supported by Bell et al. (2022), who state that interviews are a suitable method for uncovering respondents' rationales and personal viewpoints.

Semi-structured interviews provided both the flexibility and structure (Carson et al., 2001) to explore the diverse meanings of the participants given to the practice, which is essential for the exploratory nature of our research and the abductive approach.

During the interviews, probing and laddering techniques were applied. This approach facilitated the co-creation of knowledge throughout the interviews (Easterby-Smith et al.,

2021). Such flexibility is essential for our study's abductive approach, as it enables the immediate exploration of unexpected empirical insights during the interviews*, which may not be immediately articulated by participants.

In addition, the presence of two researchers during the interviews contributed to interpretative depth and richness, as it enabled multiple perspectives in questioning and probing. This allowed for deeper reflections of participants' worlds, suitable for a light version of constructionist understanding (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Below, two tables of interviewees can be found.

Table 1: Pilot interviews for mock study*

Pilot number	Name	Gender	Nationality
1	Paula	Female	Spanish
2	Elena	Female	Greek
3	Ayomi	Female	Dutch

Table 2: Main interviews for thesis

Participant number	Name	Gender	Nationality
1	Adi	Female	Bulgarian
2	Nadine	Female	Swiss
3	Ludovica	Female	Italian
4	Grace**	Female	Canadian
5	Rebeca	Female	Slovakian
6	Siana	Female	Bulgarian
7	Matilde	Female	Italian
8	Inga	Female	German
9	Olga	Female	Estonian
10	Nutcha**	Female	Thai
11	Desi	Female	Bulgarian

**At the moment of interviewing, Grace and Nutcha were living in Europe and therefore count within the European Gen Z context of this study.

4.4.3 Interview guide

The interviews for this thesis were guided by a semi-structured interview guide designed to balance consistency with flexibility (see [Appendix C](#)). While the guide ensured that all relevant topics were covered, it also gave participants the possibility to introduce new themes and further expand on their personal, subjective interpretations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This enabled the generation of thick descriptions and contributed to the qualitative depth of the study*. The order and phrasing of questions were adapted to the flow of each interview, allowing participants to influence the direction of the conversation. This approach has also been applied in previous qualitative studies, such as Hartmann and Brunk (2019), where semi-structured interviews were used to explore consumers' nostalgic experiences.

The guide was structured around key themes derived from Belk's (1988, 2013) Extended Self framework and Goffman's framework of self-presentation (1959, 1961), ensuring alignment between theory and empirical data. The interviews followed a loose chronological structure consisting of ice-breaker questions, a thematic topic structure (or "buckets"), and closing questions*. The use of a chronological structure was also applied in Hartmann and Brunk's study (2019). Below an overview of the topics can be found. See [Appendix C](#) for the complete interview guide.

Topic 1 - Belk: Materiality, The Extended Self, and the Identity-Kit

Goal: To establish the digicam as a meaningful, physical possession and uncover the difference in the experience of using it versus a smartphone.

- Subtopic 1: Heirloom and the camera as a family object
- Subtopic 2: Camera as part of the identity
- Subtopic 3: Degree of control over an object and the mastery of the skill
- Subtopic 4: Nostalgia
- Subtopic 5: Collections in the digital world
- Subtopic 6: Dematerialisation
- Subtopic 7: Identity-kit

Topic 2 - Goffman: Performance and the presentation of identity

Goal: To understand how Instagram functions as a platform for performing identity through the use of digicams.

- Subtopic 8: Front Stage and Backstage
- Subtopic 9: The mask
- Subtopic 10: Audiences

Consistent with our study's phenomenological approach, participants were asked in advance to bring their cameras with them to the interviews, an approach referred to as object-oriented research (Harrison, Rhodes and Lancaster, 2024). The digicam functioned as a visual prompt (Egan-Wyer, 2025) that helped elicit personal memories, feelings, and emotions connected to digicam use. This helped participants to move abstract descriptions and feel the meaning

attached to the camera. Some participants were additionally asked to show photographs stored on their cameras to support and deepen their storytelling during the interview (Harrison, Rhodes and Lancaster, 2024).

4.5 Sampling

A non-probability sampling strategy was employed, combining elements of convenience sampling, purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Convenience sampling was chosen for its efficiency and flexibility* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This approach allowed timely access to the target group within a constrained timeframe, allowing greater focus on in-depth analysis. Furthermore, it allowed for the flexibility to capture an emerging social phenomenon. Section 4.10 discusses the potential limitations linked to convenience sampling and the relative homogeneity of the selected participants*.

Purposive sampling was conducted by identifying participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research purpose (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Based on a clear understanding of the required sample units, potential participants were approached and assessed for their suitability. The mandatory criteria are*:

- being a Generation Z individual,
- having no professional background in photography,
- owning and actively using a digicam from the early 2000s (at least within the last six months),
- having shared at least one photo on Instagram taken with this camera.

Only participants who met the criteria were included, ensuring that they could provide relevant and experience-based contributions to our study. Our research specifically focused on non-professional camera users, drawing on van Dijck's (2008) concept of the "personal photographer", where camera use is oriented toward identity formation and the preservation of meaningful moments rather than professional purposes. This distinction is important because our study aims to explore the meanings attached to digicam use in relation to identity construction, rather than technical mastery or photographic expertise. Furthermore, participants were required to have posted digicam photographs on Instagram, as the study explores not only how identity is shaped through camera use itself, but also how it is negotiated and performed through Instagram self-presentation.

Snowball sampling was applied to complement the initial recruitment process by drawing on participants' social networks. After identifying individuals who met the predefined inclusion criteria, participants were asked to refer to others within their network who also matched the study requirements (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This approach was useful, as individuals

who use early 2000s digicams and share content on Instagram were not always easily identifiable, thereby facilitating efficient access to additional suitable participants.

The initial mock study involved three participants. For the final thesis study, the sample was expanded with an additional eleven participants, resulting in a total sample of fourteen participants. This broader sample allowed for a wider range of perspectives and increased the depth of analysis. In qualitative research, sample size is guided by the principle of saturation, meaning that data collection continues until no substantially new insights emerge (Saunders et al., 2018).

Having interviewed participants who represent over ten different nationalities, the sampling strategy allowed us to gather diverse, rich and thick descriptions that are appropriate for our study.

4.6 Data analysis

One of the chosen methods for this study is Template Analysis (TA), referred to in this research as a structured form of thematic coding. TA is a qualitative analytical method recognised for its ability to connect theoretical frameworks with empirical phenomena while maintaining flexibility throughout the analytical process (Tabari, King, and Egan, 2020), making it particularly suitable for applying Belk's and Goffman's theoretical frameworks. Rather than functioning as a fixed coding structure, TA enables researchers to iteratively refine themes in response to emerging empirical insights, making it particularly suitable for abductive and interpretative research designs (King, 2004; Tabari, King, and Egan, 2020). We previously tested this analytical approach in the mock study, where it proved successful, which further supported its suitability for the thesis study.

A key characteristic of TA is the use of a priori themes, meaning predefined categories established before the analysis (King, 2004). However, these themes remained open to modification and reinterpretation throughout the analytical process. In line with the methodology adopted by Tabari, King, and Egan (2020), the initial template was developed based on the interview guide, drawing on our theoretical framework to support a deeper exploration of the data. Moreover, it fits with our double hermeneutics approach, where we interpret our empirical results by using the TA as a "second layer" of interpretation. A similar iterative search for recurrent themes and patterns through repeated engagement with the empirical material was reported by Hartmann and Brunk's (2019) study.

The analysis was conducted through the following steps:



Figure 1: Template Analysis procedure (King and Brooks, 2017)

In addition to TA, elements of the Mystery as Method approach proposed by Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) were incorporated as a complementary analytical inspiration. While TA provided the overall structure for coding and organising the empirical material, Mystery as Method encouraged us to approach the phenomenon as something partially unresolved and puzzling. This perspective was particularly valuable given the paradox at the centre of the study: Gen Z's deliberate use of outdated digicams in a hyper-digital age.

More specifically, we adopted elements of the method by treating the phenomenon as a “mystery”, paying particular attention to outliers, contradictions, tensions, and unexpected empirical insights that did not fully align with existing theoretical assumptions. This allowed for a more open dialogue between theory and empirical material, especially in moments where existing concepts could not fully explain participants' experiences, referred to by Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) as “breakdowns.” In this way, the approach supported abductive reasoning by enabling flexibility, interpretative openness, and sensitivity to surprising findings that emerged during the analysis. Importantly, incorporating elements of Mystery as Method helped to prevent the analysis from becoming overly constrained by the chosen theoretical frameworks, ensuring that we did not get ‘blind’ to unexpected empirical insights, rather than being forced into predefined categories.

Although two a priori themes were initially identified in the interview guide (see Section 4.4.3), the TA approach enabled iterative refinement of the template based on empirical findings. Through an abductive process, combined with elements of Mystery as a Method, data from 14 interviews were continuously compared with the initial categories. This resulted in primary themes, supported by newly developed sub-themes, which were most relevant for answering the research question (see Chapter 5).

4.7 Quality criteria

In this section, the validity of the study is assessed using three core criteria for constructionist research identified by Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), as discussed by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021): authenticity, plausibility, and criticality. These criteria were also applied in the mock study. In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) highlight the importance of distinguishing qualitative from quantitative research by introducing alternative evaluation criteria such as trustworthiness and authenticity. According to these authors, trustworthiness consists of four key criteria that are comparable to those used in quantitative research: credibility (parallels internal validity), transferability (parallels external validity), dependability (parallels reliability) and confirmability (parallels objectivity). We included these criteria to strengthen our evaluation of quality, as we agree with the critical view of Guba and Lincoln (1985; 1994) that standard criteria of reliability and validity are not fully suitable for qualitative research, as they assume a single objective social reality which would position the research ‘positivist-qualitative’ (Johnson et al., 2006), rather than acknowledging the existence of multiple interpretations.

4.7.1 Authenticity

Authenticity refers to demonstrating to the reader that the researcher has a thorough understanding of what is occurring within the social context (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). In our case, authenticity is supported by the study’s empirical phenomenological design, which aims to capture how participants themselves experience and interpret the use of digicams in relation to identity-building. Through semi-structured interviews, our study generated thick descriptions of participants’ lived experiences, memories, routines, emotions, and reflections connected to both the cameras themselves and images shared on Instagram. This enabled us to explore unexpected empirical results of digicam use and create a deep understanding of how participants make sense of the practice within their everyday social and digital lives.

4.7.2 Plausibility

Plausibility requires the research to connect with ongoing interests or concerns within the wider research community (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). Plausibility is strengthened by our study’s clear connection to an ongoing academic and cultural concern, namely the renewed popularity of retro technologies and imperfect aesthetics among Gen Z, as well as the role of Instagram in contemporary identity performance. As outlined in the literature review (see Chapter 2), existing research has largely focused on analogue photography and nostalgia, while the use of early 2000s digicams remains underexplored. By focusing specifically on this form of digicam use by Gen Z, our study addresses a relevant gap in the

literature and contributes to ongoing discussions around identity construction and digital self-representation.

4.7.3 Criticality

Criticality invites readers to reconsider their assumptions that are often accepted without reflection, leading to the development of new insights (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). In our research, criticality is demonstrated by our study's ability to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about digital photography, social media, and identity construction. Our research questions the assumption that smartphones are dominantly used for taking and posting photos and for the multifunctional identity-kit (Belk, 2013) and highlights that Gen Z participants may deliberately choose a separate, older, and less technologically advanced device as part of a more effortful, selective and aesthetically meaningful practice. This opens up a more critical understanding of digital self-presentation, showing that identity-building on Instagram is not only shaped by content shared by phone cameras, but also by the deliberate choice of medium and the material practices around it. This means that we encourage readers to reconsider assumptions about the relationship between digital technologies and the self, including the idea that digital self-expression is understood through convenience and smartphones alone*.

4.7.4 Trustworthiness: credibility

Credibility refers to whether the findings reflect the social worlds of the participants who were studied (Bell et al., 2022). We acknowledge that during interviews, there is always a possibility that participants give favourable answers to create social desirability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To address this, we used probing and laddering techniques to move beyond immediate responses and explore deep meanings, motivations and interpretations of participants. Furthermore, after each interview, we summarised the key points and allowed participants to add, clarify, or correct their statements. This process helped ensure that we accurately understood our participants' social worlds correctly and aligned with the concept of member validation (Bell et al., 2022).

Moreover, the presence of two researchers during interviews and the analytical process also contributed to credibility, as we continuously discussed interpretations and reflected upon them rather than relying on a single individual's interpretation.

4.7.5 Trustworthiness: transferability

Thick descriptions enable readers to assess the potential transferability of the findings to other social contexts (Bell et al., 2022). As discussed in section 4.3, our study aims for analytical rather than statistical generalizability by generating contextual insights relevant to similar

settings. Transferability was supported through a clear description of the research context, namely Gen Z consumers who use digicams and share photographs on Instagram, as well as detailed explanations of the phenomenon, including the role of early 2000s cameras, the imperfect aesthetic, and Instagram as a platform for identity performance. Furthermore, the inclusion of participants from different national backgrounds within a shared social context allows readers to assess the relevance of the findings to comparable contexts.

4.7.6 Trustworthiness: dependability

Dependability refers to the extent to which the research process is transparent, logical, and clearly documented. Guba and Lincoln propose an auditing approach to achieve this, although complete auditing is often not feasible due to its demanding nature (Bell et al., 2022).

Instead, the stages of the research process are explicitly described in this thesis, including the research design, sampling strategy, participant selection criteria, interview process, and analytical procedure. In addition, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. This helped preserve the richness of the data while reducing reliance on memory or selective note-taking.

Dependability is further strengthened by the use of Template Analysis (TA) and elements of Mystery as a Method, as the coding process followed a structured yet flexible procedure (see chapter 4.6), allowing the development of themes to remain transparent and traceable.

4.7.7 Trustworthiness: confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are grounded in the empirical data rather than shaped by the researchers' personal values (Bell et al., 2022). Within our light constructionist approach, we acknowledge that complete objectivity is not possible, as knowledge is co-created between researchers and participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2022).

However, we aimed to ensure that our interpretations remained closely connected to the data by continuously comparing interpretations with the interview transcripts and remaining open to new insights emerging during the analysis, rather than relying solely on predefined categories from the interview guide. Although Belk's and Goffman's frameworks guided the analysis, we remained open to findings and surprises that extended or challenged these theories. In addition, leading questions were removed from the interview guide before the interviews to minimise researcher influence.

Furthermore, reflexivity played an important role throughout the research process, as we critically reflected on how our own backgrounds, assumptions, and prior knowledge may have shaped the interpretation of the data. More on reflexivity can be found in Chapter 4.9.

4.8 Ethical considerations

To reduce ethical risks, the four ethical principles outlined by Bell et al. (2022) were taken into consideration throughout our research process. The principles originate from Diener and Crandall's work (1978):

- Avoidance of harm to participants
- Informed consent
- Privacy
- Preventing deception

To avoid harm to participants, permission to record interviews was requested at the beginning of each session, and participants were informed that recordings would be deleted after the thesis period. In addition, transcripts were treated confidentially, and participants were given the option to remain anonymous if preferred. To ensure that participants' stories remained private to outsiders, all interviews were conducted in private settings, such as university meeting rooms, library rooms, or participants' homes, to ensure privacy and comfort. Moreover, to ensure that participants' experiences were represented accurately, each participant was shown the findings and interpretations related to their interview that were included in the thesis, allowing potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations to be clarified. Also, every participant was asked whether it was acceptable to share their first name in our research, and all participants agreed to the use of their first names.

Regarding informed consent, Bell et al. (2022) note that it is challenging to provide potential participants with all the information necessary to make a fully informed decision about their participation. We also experienced this challenge, as the duration of interviews was sometimes underestimated, and not all details about the research were shared in advance, to avoid influencing participants' answers beforehand. However, we made sure that our participants received sufficient information to decide whether they wanted to participate. This was done by sending potential participants a WhatsApp message explaining the topic of our study, why they were considered suitable participants, the estimated duration of the interview, and the period in which we hoped to conduct the interview. When participants asked additional questions about the research process, these were answered before they agreed to participate. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all approached participants agreed to take part.

Bell et al. (2022) argue that privacy is closely connected to informed consent, since participants who understand what their involvement includes also accept that part of their privacy may be given up in the context of the study. We were therefore attentive to the privacy of our participants and allowed each of them to refuse answering any question they considered too sensitive. During the interviews, no participant chose to refuse any questions. Furthermore, because semi-structured interviews allowed us to deviate from the interview guide, we were careful not to probe too far into personal stories or collect more personal

information than necessary. This helped ensure that participants could share their experiences within their own boundaries and in a way that felt safe and comfortable.

Finally, preventing deception was an important principle throughout our study. It was important to us that the participants' experiences and meanings were represented as accurately as possible. As already mentioned in the section on avoidance of harm, we discussed our findings and interpretations of each interview with the relevant participant to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and to ensure that our interpretations reflect the participants' intended meanings.

4.9 Reflexivity

We sought to demonstrate strong epistemic reflexivity throughout our research by acknowledging our backgrounds, prior knowledge, and assumptions, while critically reflecting on how these positions may shape the research process (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). In line with Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), this reflects researcher positionality. According to their categorisation, we occupy an insider position, as we study our own generation and a phenomenon observed among our peers, while some interviewees were either personally known to us (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) or connected through mutual acquaintances.

However, reflexivity does not create a completely neutral position. Rather, it enables a more transparent and realistic relationship between the researchers and the phenomenon, consistent with the view that truth is socially negotiated (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Within qualitative research, reflexivity therefore requires openness about how researchers influence the interpretation of empirical material, as findings cannot speak for themselves without interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in relation to the study's double hermeneutic approach, where researchers interpret participants' own interpretations of their experiences.

4.10 Limitations

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, all participants were women, as male Gen Z users actively engaging in digicam practices were difficult to identify. We acknowledge that gender likely shapes how identity is performed through aesthetic consumption and Instagram curation. As the study included only female participants, this may have influenced the findings, and we therefore remain reflexive about how gender may have shaped the perspectives and experiences represented in the study. Second, the study partly

relied on convenience and snowball sampling through existing social networks, which may have resulted in a relatively socially and culturally similar participant group, particularly as most participants were students. However, purposive sampling simultaneously strengthened the relevance of the empirical material, as all participants actively engaged with the phenomenon under investigation.

Furthermore, because the study focused on identity performance and self-presentation, participants may have consciously or unconsciously romanticised or curated aspects of their practices during the interviews. Although probing techniques and reflexivity were applied throughout the research process, interviews remain co-constructed social situations in which complete access to participants' motivations can never be fully guaranteed. In addition, some interviews took place online, which may have influenced openness and depth of responses.

Another limitation is that the revival of digicams may partly reflect a temporary trend within contemporary social media culture, meaning that the meanings attached to these practices may evolve over time. Similarly, the study focused specifically on Instagram, while Gen Z identity construction also takes place across platforms such as TikTok and Pinterest. The findings should therefore be understood within a specific social media and cultural context.

In addition, the study was conducted from an insider researcher position, as both researchers belonged to the same generation and social environment as many participants. While this provided contextual understanding and easier access to the phenomenon, it also increased the risk of shared assumptions remaining unquestioned during interpretation. Finally, due to the limited timeframe of the thesis, the study captured participants' practices and meanings at a single moment in time rather than longitudinally. Moreover, due to a technical recording issue, one interview could not be transcribed and was instead analysed through detailed interview notes.

5 Findings and analysis

In this chapter, we present the findings and analysis from the semi-structured interviews conducted for this research. As outlined in the methodology chapter, we combined Template Analysis (TA) with the Mystery as a Method approach in order to structure the findings around our theoretical framework, while also remaining open to unexpected empirical insights during the analysis. Through moving abductively between theory and empirical material, several recurring themes emerged that together help explain how Gen Z understands digicams in a hyper-digital age. In this chapter, we use parts of the literature review and theory to make sense of the findings and understand them in depth. Parts marked with an asterisk are taken from the mock study in the BUSR33 course.

To create a coherent understanding of the phenomenon under study, the findings are organised into four main themes. The first theme explores how digicams become part of participants' identity construction. The second theme examines the search for imperfection, authenticity and presence in the moment, including an interesting paradox. The third theme investigates how participants negotiate between analogue nostalgia and digital convenience, showing why digital retro-tools cannot simply be grouped with fully analogue retro technologies. Finally, the fourth theme explores how these meanings and aesthetics are performed and curated on Instagram.

5.1 Digital Cameras as Identity Objects

The digicams from the early 2000s are another example of the return of the retro, vintage tools. Nadine reported that she *“bought a flip phone... which basically falls into the same thing, like it's kind of a throwback to the past,”* showing the possession of multiple retro tools from the same category and reflecting a broader trend emerging in response to contemporary life:

“This year was different because people were pushing a lot on the analogue.... and I think it's... a reflection of what we're going through right now with AI and... overuse of social media and ... brain rot”. - Ludovica

5.1.1 The camera as an heirloom and a memory object

We first explore how our participants acquired their cameras and explore whether this reflects nostalgic consumption of objects connected to periods they did not personally experience, referred to in the literature review as historical nostalgia. We also investigate whether participants' attachments to digicams are shaped by communal nostalgia through associations with loved ones and family experiences, or whether these meanings are instead connected to participants' own childhood memories and lived experiences.

"We love being connected to what we were used to seeing when we were younger....So it's like a nostalgia thing, I would say." - Matilde

When exploring how participants acquired their cameras, a strong pattern emerged: almost all participants connected digicams to family memories and childhood experiences. Participants repeatedly described growing up surrounded by parents who used digicams during holidays, family gatherings, and everyday moments.

Others described family rituals of looking through old photographs together, such as family meetups where pictures from old trips were projected in the living room. Importantly, most participants did not actively use digicams themselves as children. Instead, they remembered observing their parents using them. This created an interesting combination of lived memory and communal nostalgia. Participants were not necessarily returning to their own photographic practices, but rather reconnecting with a broader atmosphere and aesthetic associated with childhood and family life. They started using digicams themselves for the first time, in their twenties, and learned how to use them through earlier family experiences. This became even more visible in the stories of participants who inherited cameras directly from their parents. In our mock study, Paula described her digicam as a continuation of her father's role as the *"typical dad"* who was always *"behind the camera."* While studying abroad, she often used her digicam and reflected that *"I become my dad,"* illustrating how these lived experiences continue to connect her to her father.* This resembles Belk's (1988) idea that the identity of a family member can extend onto an individual through the possession and use of an heirloom object, thereby becoming part of one's own identity construction.

The findings in this sub-theme suggest a form of communal nostalgia, where participants associated digicam photography with an idealised past partly remembered through family photographs, parental practices, and nostalgic aesthetics. In this sense, the camera functions as what Belk (1988) describes as a memory object, reconnecting participants to both personal childhood memories and imagined past times. In the next sub-theme, we explore how participants incorporate the digicam into what Belk (1988) describes as the identity-kit, a collection of objects carried to maintain and project a stable sense of self.

5.1.2 The camera as part of the identity-kit

Beyond memory and family attachment, the findings showed that participants described the use of the camera as something that actively shapes how they perceive themselves and how they behave in social situations.

In particular, the embodied experience of carrying the device and hearing it “click” when taking photos contributed to participants’ motivations to use the camera and to the meanings and identities attached to it:

"When... I wear my camera, I feel like I'm a photographer, or maybe ... like I'm the expert here. So I need to capture the moments ... like I'm a photographer " - Elena

This quote illustrates changes in how Elena feels about her personality at the moment of interaction with her camera. She continued: *“I feel more confident ... [using it]”, “[I] hold the camera, so it gives [me] prestige”* and *“it makes me feel aesthetic”*.

Ludovica reflected that the digicam changes *“the perception”* of the person using it because smartphones are ordinary and accessible to everyone, whereas the digicam, even though it is *“not a proper [high-quality] camera”*, suggests something more intentional and unique:

“It makes me feel like I’m different than everyone else... it still makes you ... stand out maybe from just people [who] take pictures with the phone.”

The digicam therefore functioned not only as a recording device, but also as a symbolic object that shaped participants’ social identities. Similar to Whitehouse’s (2023) research, which shows that vinyl listening is experienced as more deliberate and meaningful than everyday digital music consumption, participants positioned digicam photography as more intentional than smartphone photography. As Adi explained, using the digicam *“enhances my experience”* because it transforms photography into something more intentional than *“just taking random pictures with your phone”*.

Participants also associated the camera with a change of experience. Rebeca explained that seeing the flash and physically taking the picture made moments feel *“more authentic”* and *“a bit nicer.”* Others described the camera as adding a *“vibe”*, *“mood,”* or emotional depth to *“make [a moment] more special”*.

Participants repeatedly explained that the value of the camera did not only lie in the final image, but in the embodied ritual surrounding its use: hearing the click, using the flash, carrying the device, showing it to others, and becoming recognised as *“the digital camera friend.”* In this sense, the camera itself became part of the experience being documented, and contributes to both the user’s identity and social position rather than remaining a simple tool for capturing pictures.

5.1.3 Collecting memories and rematerialising the digital

In this paragraph, we explore the rematerialisation of digital possessions through collections, and more specifically, digital collections, exploring how they remain part of the Extended Self and contribute to identity-building in the sense of Belk (2013).

Although digicams produce digital images rather than physical photographs, participants still treated their images as meaningful collections tied to identity and memory. This reflects Belk's (2013) argument that digital possessions can continue to function as part of the Extended Self despite their immaterial nature.

"I have like 5,000 pictures [on the camera] at least.... to look at them when I'm showing people old pictures." - Inga

Interestingly, several participants described intentionally preserving thousands of photographs on SD cards without deleting them. Siana explained:

"I have decided that [on] all of the SDs, [I am] never going to delete anything. So eventually [when] it fills up, I am going to buy a new one. Like some sort of albums."

Others described copying photographs to multiple SD cards for "double protection", buying additional storage once the SD card became full, or referring to their collections as "albums of memories". Participants repeatedly framed their image collections as archives of meaningful experiences and important moments rather than disposable digital files. In this sense, the camera turned into a tool to collect memories and "remember[ing] what we were seeing, what we were surrounded by". This closely reflects Belk's (1988) argument that photographs and the cameras used to create them function as markers of both "individual and collective memory", linking people to past experiences, important others, and previous versions of themselves (Belk, 1990). In this sense, both the digicam and the image collections attached to it contributed to participants' continuous sense of identity over time.

Interestingly, despite the digital nature of the photographs, participants reproduced many practices historically associated with physical photo albums. Looking back through photographs became a nostalgic and emotional activity connected to storytelling, reminiscing, and preserving identity over time. In some cases, the SD card almost replaced the family album because it was digital, but still treated as something valuable, protected, and emotionally meaningful. This connection to earlier family practices was further reinforced by how participants understood the purpose of photography itself. Siana explained that growing up, "looking at albums of our parents" shaped the idea that photographs are meant to "preserve something" rather than be "just random" pictures. Unlike smartphone photography, digicam photography was connected to "sentiments" and "the memorabilia part of it."

Instagram similarly became a form of digital memory collection. Ayomi described her account as a "digital diary," in which she "only posts pictures from my digital camera," while

Ludovica explained that Instagram functions as “*another type of memorial*” alongside physical albums. This resembles Belk’s (2013) idea of dynamic and evolving digital collections, where curated Instagram profiles reflect identities that are continuously constructed and updated. According to Adi, the Instagram collection also serves a social function:

"It [Instagram profile] started with [me] having so many pictures that I wanted to collect ...and share them somewhere...and [the people who follow my account], I would generally go to [them], take the camera and show them the picture[s]."

In this sense, Instagram functions not only as a digital album, but also as a space for sharing and revisiting memories with close others, resembling how physical photo albums were traditionally viewed within families and social circles. Similar to Schwarz’s (2009) discussion of the temporal nostalgia provoked by family albums, participants revisited and shared photographs long after the moment had passed, allowing digital images to evoke nostalgia and preserve identity over time. Participants therefore rematerialised the digital not only through SD cards and printed photographs, but also through carefully curated online archives that represented and extended their identities over time.

These findings are important because they show a process of rematerialising the digital (Belk, 2013). Even though the images were technically digital files, participants gave them a material-like value through saving, organising, protecting, and revisiting. This suggests that the emotional value traditionally associated with physical photographs can persist in digital contexts, becoming part of the Extended Self through the curation of digital and physical collections.

5.1.4 Theme summary

Together, these findings show that digicams function as more than practical tools for photography. Participants use them as identity objects connected to family memories, nostalgic imaginaries, self-expression, and social identity. Drawing on Belk’s concept of the Extended Self (1988), the findings demonstrate how the digicams became emotionally meaningful possessions through memory, embodied use, and the curation of digital and physical collections. While previous research often emphasises the materiality of analogue objects in identity construction, our findings suggest that digital devices producing digital artefacts can still become integrated into the Extended Self, despite lacking the full materiality associated with analogue objects, when they are embedded within meaningful practices and memories.

This first theme has shown that the camera becomes meaningful not only through memory and identity, but also through the emotional atmosphere and intentionality associated with its use. Participants repeatedly contrasted the camera with the smartphone, associating digicam photography with nostalgia, authenticity, and emotional presence. The next theme explores

how imperfection, technological deceleration, and presence became central motivations for using digicams.

5.2 The Search for Imperfection, Presence, and Authenticity

After we explored how the digicam becomes more than a tool for taking pictures and becomes part of the Extended Self, we now explore what additional meaning it brings to the moment and lived experiences of our participants. In this theme, we dive deeper into how participants value digicams for their imperfect aesthetic and their ability to create more intentional and emotionally meaningful experiences.

5.2.1 The imperfect aesthetic and the search for aura

One of the strongest recurring findings across the interviews was participants' attraction to the imperfect aesthetic created by the digicams. Ludovica perceived the camera as removing the "*performance filter*", while Nadine suggested that it removes the pressure to appear perfect, somehow freeing the person using it. However, to understand the imperfect aesthetic, we need to examine one of the central themes surrounding analogue and retro tools: the idea of "aura", as introduced in our literature review. Building on these insights, we explored whether the non-physical images produced by digicams can also carry a similar aura.

"... It also happened that the picture [taken with a digicam] was too dark or a bit blurred and that's ... the magic of it.... It is what makes the pictures more unique ... because with the phone, sometimes it's way too perfect." - Ludovica

Here, technical limitations such as blur or darkness are reinterpreted as symbolic value and aesthetic aura, even being described as magical, over technical sharpness and perfection. This resembles the idea of aura associated with vinyl records created by the imperfect scratches and warm sound produced by the record player (Whitehouse, 2023). This also resonates with Hartmann and Brunk's (2019) idea of re-enchantment against the backdrop of an efficient and disenchanted reality, where consumers attribute magical qualities to ordinary objects and practices, thereby reintroducing a sense of specialness and enchantment through consumption (Ritzer, 2005).

To further understand the idea of aura, we can look at its perceived loss, as discussed by Niemeyer (2014). She states that aura is lost through technical reproducibility. This motive strongly appeared in our findings, as participants repeatedly described smartphone pictures as too technically perfect, with "*perfect pixels*", where "*you can take a [clear] picture of the moon*". In contrast, participants valued the digital camera's "*grainy feel*" and images that

looked “*like a movie*” or “*like if you have astigmatism*”. Extending this idea, Siana explained that “*if it's the exact same picture [taken] with the phone and with the camera, usually [with] the camera ... I look a bit more fondly,*” signalling the preference for digicam photos because of the emotional value and meanings attached to the image.

"The phones are getting too good ... I feel like sometimes they're showing ... reality too real that it looks kind of ugly ... because ... reality is kind of ugly.....but [the camera] kind of takes away the pressure to look always perfect." - Nadine

Rebeca explained that using a digicam reduces the tendency to take excessive pictures in search of a “*perfect*” shot, as is often the case with smartphones. Instead, she takes “*one or max two*” pictures, which encourages her to “*appreciate ... and live more in the moment*”. Participants cared less about perfection, while still perceiving the digicam image as more “*authentic*.” We see that photographs taken with the digicam, although still digital, were experienced by participants as more desirable and more “*real*” than smartphone images, which closely resembles Zhu’s (2025) finding that analogue images feel more “*alive*” and as “*having a soul*”. This further deepens the paradox that although both devices are digital (digicam and phone), photographs taken with the digicam were perceived as more authentic and emotionally meaningful. In this sense, we can suggest that retro digital objects and artefacts can still carry an “*aura*” and a “*soul*” despite their digital nature. Thus, our findings challenge the idea that digital possessions lack “*aura*” (Benjamin, 1930/1968) and nuance Belk’s (2006) argument that purely digital possessions lack the “*soft tactile characteristics*” of material possessions.

Importantly, participants did not seek extremely poor image quality or complete technological regression. Instead, they looked for a balance between convenience and imperfection. As Nadine explained, she wanted “*a good mix of good quality, but not too good,*” while Siana described the images as retro-looking, “*but not too bad*”. This positions digicams in a symbolic middle ground between analogue photography and the technical perfection of smartphones.

In this sense, the findings indicate that the attraction of digicams lies in the aura and enchantment they create, while simultaneously resisting the perfection and rational efficiency associated with modern smartphone technology. This reflects a process of re-enchantment and romanticisation of photography practices (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019), as well as a broader desire for photographic imperfection (Niemeyer, 2014).

5.2.2 Presence in the moment and the paradox of digital slowness

In the previous paragraph, we explored the imperfect aesthetic of digicam photography. However, Rebeca’s quote also revealed another aspect of imperfection. By no longer

searching for the “*perfect*” shot, she felt more present in the moment and appreciated the experience itself more. This leads to our next finding.

“The camera adds to the moment, because most of the time it allows me to put my phone away.” - Matilde

This quote by Matilde illustrates how participants associated the camera with increased presence, focus, and intentionality during social events, while simultaneously disconnecting from the smartphone. This distancing from the phone emerged as one of the strongest motivations for participants to use the digicam. Paula illustrated this clearly by sharing that *“when I take the camera, it's like ... I need to be more focused. It's not just like with my phone that I can take like a hundred [pictures].”* Similarly, Olga explained that when using the digicam instead of the phone, she *“can focus on what's happening,”* allowing her to become more engaged with her surroundings. She contrasted this with smartphone usage, where she would *“go scroll on the phone, ... read the messages instead of being in the moment”*. Ayomi indirectly illustrated this shift in attention by explaining that with her phone she mostly photographs *“food”*, whereas with the camera she takes more pictures of her *“surroundings.”* In this sense, the digicam becomes more than a tool for capturing moments, actively shaping participants’ engagement with their surroundings.

Beyond increasing attentiveness during the act of photographing itself, participants also described the digicam as a way of distancing themselves from the distractions and fast-paced nature of smartphone culture. Ludovica described smartphone photography as automatic and detached: *“swipe, click, and then you don't look at it anymore”*, whereas using the digicam kept the user *“more in the present”*. Olga reflected that taking out her phone immediately introduced distractions such as messages and notifications, causing her brain to *“disconnect from the moment”*. Grace also described how she and her peers are *“actively trying to stay off their phones,”* and that the camera *“adds to the moment because it feels more physical”*.

These findings closely resemble Husemann and Eckhardt’s (2018) idea of technological deceleration, where consumers deliberately use less efficient tools in order to slow down both physically and mentally. Importantly, technological deceleration does not imply rejecting technology completely, but rather regaining control over how technology shapes attention and usage. In this sense, digicams function as a digital tool that paradoxically enables temporary detachment from the hyper-digital environment associated with smartphones. As Desi reflected:

“People need to feel something real ... in this fast world. Everything on socials is so fast-paced, so people try to find something they can connect to.”

Going back to Rebeca’s reflection on no longer searching for the best shot, several participants explained that the camera reduced the need for constant evaluation and retaking of pictures. Olga reflected that *“people are less picky”* with camera pictures because, unlike

smartphones, digicam images cannot be controlled or perfected as easily. According to her, this helps participants to *“live in the moment”* rather than focus on capturing it perfectly. In this sense, the digicam encourages participants to accept imperfection rather than continuously optimise the image.

Interestingly, participants also described how the delayed accessibility of digicam images prolonged the social experience beyond the event itself. Inga explained that with smartphone pictures, *“you immediately airdrop them to your friends and ... you will probably never talk about them again.”* In contrast, because the camera’s function is only to take pictures, digicam photographs are revisited later during the transfer process and sent in the group chat after the social event, which *“sparks the conversation again.”* According to Inga, this delayed engagement *“does add to the moment,”* suggesting that the digicam not only captures experiences without interrupting them through immediate sharing, but also extends and enriches them over time, making memories feel more meaningful and memorable.

5.2.3 Theme summary

The findings suggest that participants were not searching for technical superiority, but rather for imperfection, atmosphere, and emotional authenticity. The value of the digicam did not lie in producing objectively higher-quality images, but in the emotional meanings attached to the imperfection itself. This suggests that the imperfect aesthetic functions symbolically by resisting the polished and performative qualities associated with contemporary smartphone photography.

The second sub-theme further demonstrated that participants did not fully disconnect from digital culture through the use of the camera. Instead, they selectively slowed down specific parts of the photographic experience while remaining within digital systems. This makes the paradox particularly interesting: although the camera remained fully digital, participants still experienced it as creating slowness, intentionality, and delayed gratification traditionally associated with analogue photography. However, unlike analogue photography, this slowness was not created through film development or technical complexity, but through small forms of deliberate friction, such as transferring photographs later and taking fewer pictures more intentionally.

The camera was repeatedly framed as a way of temporarily escaping the hyper-connectivity and constant accessibility of smartphone culture. Building on this idea of “physical” presence and intentionality, the next section explores how participants negotiated the inconvenience of carrying and using a separate device, and how this extra effort became part of the meaning and experience attached to digicam use.

5.3 Negotiating Between Analogue Nostalgia and Digital Convenience

As discussed in the literature review, compact digital cameras remain relatively understudied within nostalgic consumption research. Interestingly, participants themselves also implicitly highlighted the camera's hybrid position between analogue and smartphone photography. In the following sub-themes, we explore this middle ground that the digicams take between the full analogue and smartphone cameras and our participants' thoughts, feelings and understandings of this middle-ground tool.

5.3.1 A separate device - a different meaning

During interviews, participants made a symbolic distinction between smartphones and digicams, and described how this distinction shaped identity, presence, and lived experiences.

Nadine perfectly illustrated this distinction when reflecting on the pictures stored on the camera she received from her parents. She described the photographs on the device as "*nice memories*" and contrasted this with her smartphone:

"I feel like with my phone, I often also have a lot of bad memories just because it is what you use for everything, also to ... see the news about what's happening in the world [and] to ..., I don't know, get rejection emails. If I look at the camera, I only see ... all nice memories because I only use it for nice memories."

This quote demonstrates how participants symbolically separate the meanings attached to the two devices. The smartphone became associated with everyday stress, distraction, overconsumption, work, perfection, bad news, and emotional exhaustion. The camera was reserved for emotionally meaningful experiences and positive memories. This resembles Whitehouse's (2023) findings on vinyl listening, where consumers valued using a separate device for a hobby. Similarly, Fernandez and Beverland (2019) and Zhong and Wu (2023) describe how consumers seek single-focus devices to separate meaningful leisure activities from the overstimulation of everyday digital life.

Elena similarly positioned the digicam as a single-focus tool for identity expression and hobbies, explaining that it is used "*for the people that I want to share my moments with*" and to "*capture what I feel and ... express myself.*" In contrast, she described the smartphone as overloaded with unrelated functions and distractions, containing "*random screenshots*" and "*things from my notes of the university*". Together, these findings suggest that participants experienced the digicam as emotionally separated from the multifunctional, overstimulating, and socially demanding nature of the smartphone.

Interpreted through Belk's (1988) lens, these findings suggest that the camera contributes to identity construction not simply through *possession*, but through what participants *do* with it. They did not value the camera only because it has one practical function, but because that function carried a distinct emotional meaning. Participants treated the camera as a dedicated object for emotional expression, meaningful social interaction, and memory preservation, while the smartphone remained associated with distraction, overconsumption, and emotional overload. In this sense, the physicality of carrying and using a separate camera, together with the routines and meanings attached to it, shaped participants' digital self-expression through material possession and emotional separation from the smartphone.

5.3.2 Rejecting full analogue inconvenience

After exploring the symbolic meaning of the digicam as a separate device, we now explore what it means for participants to actually use and carry the device around in everyday life and the routines that come with it. In this sub-theme, we compare digicams to both analogue cameras and smartphones in order to understand which forms of effort participants accepted, rejected, or considered meaningful.

Participants repeatedly acknowledged that using the digicam required more effort than smartphone photography. Ludovica explained that during social events, *"it's easier for me to have my phone with me also because, sometimes I forget [to bring] my camera,"* confessing that bringing and carrying the camera is *"a little bit harder."* She still deliberately tries *"to also switch in social settings toward taking more camera photos instead of phone photos"*. Other participants similarly agreed that the camera is *"really slow,"* *"a hassle"* to carry together with the phone, and requires *"more effort"* when taking pictures. Thus, they are aware of the annoyance it creates. Moreover, Grace reflected that she invests *"more effort into the camera photo"* than into smartphone photography, while Paula explained that the limited storage on the SD card forces her to be more selective when taking pictures. Following Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt's (2024) logic, these forms of inconvenience, labour, and selectivity should increase attachment to the digicam, similarly to how consumers of analogue tools value effort and skill acquisition.

However, our findings do not fully support this argument. Inga, for example, reflected on how previous difficulties in transferring photos actually reduced her motivation to use the camera:

"No, I don't think [I would use my digicam as much] because it was just ... annoying to [transfer] over the laptop... I had to ask my parents if I could use their laptop and ... I didn't really understand how it was working."

Although she acknowledged that the process would be easier today, she explained that the integration with her phone now makes the digicam more accessible, as *"the phone is the main device that I use in my daily life,"* allowing her to *"bring the digicam anywhere"*. Similarly, Adi emphasised the ease of use as a key motivation, explaining that *"you can bring it with you*

anywhere, it's like a small thingy, ... it's very easy to use". Olga likewise rejected her parents' "better" and "more professional" camera because "it was inconvenient to grab on a trip," leading her to deliberately choose a smaller and easier alternative.

Matilde similarly explained that she switched from an analogue camera to a digicam in order to avoid the costs of printing photographs, the effort required to visit specialised film development stores, and the environmental waste associated with disposable film rolls. These findings suggest that, although participants were willing to tolerate a certain level of inconvenience, they actively avoided excessive labour, technical difficulty, and analogue frustration.

5.3.3 Theme summary

The findings of this theme demonstrate that digicams occupy a symbolic and practical middle ground between analogue photography and smartphone photography. Participants valued the camera as a separate and dedicated device for joy and meaningful experiences, but did not seek full analogue authenticity or complete technological difficulty. While they accepted certain forms of inconvenience, such as carrying a separate device and transferring photographs later, they simultaneously rejected excessive labour, technical complexity, and analogue frustration. In this sense, participants searched for a controlled form of nostalgic imperfection that remained emotionally meaningful while still convenient and accessible. This finding challenges previous research on retro consumption (Belk, 1988; Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt, 2024; Zhu, 2025), which often emphasises labour, mastery, inconvenience, and skill acquisition as central motivations for using analogue technologies which we further develop in the Discussion.

5.4 Performing the Imperfect Self on Instagram

While participants frequently described digicam photography as more authentic, present, and emotionally meaningful than smartphone photography, the findings also revealed strong forms of curation, audience awareness, and impression management surrounding how these photographs were presented online. In this theme, we therefore explore how participants perform and negotiate identity through digicam photography on Instagram. We do this by drawing on Goffman's concepts of Front Stage and Backstage behaviour, and impression management.

5.4.1 Curating the Self on the Instagram Front Stage

In Goffmanian language, the Front refers to the situation in which the act takes place for the observers. We found that participants carefully choose, organise, and present their pictures on their Instagram accounts in ways that reflect specific identities and desired impressions. Although digicam photographs were often described as more “*authentic*” and “*less performative*” than smartphone photographs, participants still engaged in strong forms of selective curation and audience awareness.

Ludovica described how her Instagram feed became closely connected to her digicam:

“Now I am kind of ... in this spot where I am like, should I be less strict about this, because I think now ... for me, it's like mandatory ... oh, I cannot post on my feed unless I have actually good pictures with my camera.”

She explained that these pictures feel more “*permanent*” and memorable because they “*take more time and effort*”. While digicam photographs were reserved for her Instagram feed, smartphone pictures were more often uploaded to Instagram stories, which disappeared after 24 hours and therefore felt less permanent and important.

Importantly, Ludovica explicitly reflected on the performative nature of her public Instagram profile, explaining that it is connected to “*the performance part of taking pictures*” because the images are viewed by “*another external eye or viewer.*” She further explained:

“I'm performing a specific side of myself for these people, which I'm not doing with my friends, because I don't need to perform for my friends in a sense”.

Siana similarly described how different layers of her identity become visible across different audiences. According to her, her public profile initially presents “*cool pictures*” and a composed image, while a “*saved personality for close friends*” is revealed through stories and more private uploads. Importantly, she explained that the digicam is used “*exclusively mainly for posts,*” whereas content shared with closer audiences “*almost never*” involves the digicam. This suggests that the digicam is strongly tied to curated, outward-facing identity performance, rather than more spontaneous or intimate self-expression.

Zooming further into participants’ identities, we explored how they think their audience perceives them and how they would like to be perceived. Nadine reflected that because her profile mainly contains pictures of “*landscapes, friends, and travelling*” rather than selfies, her followers may perceive her as “*definitely an introvert*”. However, the quote below shows she is successful in actively building her mysterious online identity through the pictures she posts with her digicam:

“I think they would think I am really adventurous just based on the picture[s] a big part that I want to be seen as [is], I don't know, maybe a crazy aunt that is somewhere else every single day and nobody knows where she's going.”

Ludovica provided particularly interesting reflections regarding the tension between authenticity and performance on Instagram. Although she described digicam photography as “*more intimate and personal*”, she simultaneously questioned how much of her “*true self*” was actually reflected in the identity she performed online:

“It is the performance that I’m trying to build for myself of being this artsy, mysterious person. Which I am not.”

As she described it, there is a constant search for balance between presenting herself and preserving privacy. She suggested that her private account may represent her truest self more than her public profile. These findings closely resemble Goffman’s (1959) idea of “dramatic realisation,” where individuals selectively highlight aspects of themselves that confirm the identity they wish to present, while suppressing characteristics that may disrupt the coherence of the performance. Grace similarly explained that if a post is “*not within the persona that I am trying to curate and it does not feel very ‘me’*”, she feels like she is “*breaking character*”. This further illustrates how participants maintained coherent online performances and carefully evaluated whether content aligned with the identity they wanted to communicate online. In this sense, the findings show that participants carefully managed which parts of themselves became visible to different audiences, closely reflecting Goffman’s (1959) idea that individuals adjust and manage performances depending on the audience and social setting. It also reinforces Goffman’s (1959) idea that performances are inherently fragile and require continuous impression management in order to maintain a stable role and coherent identity presentation online.

To conclude this subchapter, Grace showed interesting insights into strong audience awareness and impression management surrounding Instagram posting:

“The finality of actually posting is a bit scary, ... I am definitely a little bit too online or too aware of the way people are perceiving me online.”

This demonstrates the high level of impression management surrounding Instagram activity. Rather than posting spontaneously, she goes through a reflective backstage process before presenting content to others. In the next sub-chapter, we discuss the backstage labour behind posting pictures in more depth.

5.4.2 The Backstage Labour

Translating Goffman’s distinction between Front Stage and Backstage into contemporary digital culture, the Backstage within this study can be understood as the hidden labour and preparation that remain invisible in the final Instagram performance.

While many participants explained that they preferred not to heavily edit their digicam pictures, as they appreciated the natural retro aesthetic created by the device itself, some still engaged in careful aesthetic adjustment before posting. Nadine, for example, shared that she edits most of her digicam pictures *“so they have a similar aesthetic,”* while Olga similarly shared that she edits her digicam pictures before uploading them to Instagram. Both participants also described sending pictures to friends for approval before posting. Nadine further explained that she *“normally posts when everybody is on the way home from work and sitting on their phones”*. These findings indicate that the “effortless” nostalgic aesthetic presented on Instagram often involved significant hidden preparation and reflexive labour behind the scenes.

“I am crazy when it comes to curating everything.” - Siana

Many participants also described how identity curation already began long before the moment of posting itself. Siana, for example, explained that she often already knows beforehand whether an event or moment is *“Instagram-worthy,”* describing how she deliberately curates her outfits, aesthetics, and locations *“for months”* before social events. For her, the digicam is mainly used for these special occasions rather than in everyday life. Similarly, Elena explained that she already plans whether she wants to post content before travelling, stating that if she goes *“on a long trip”* or visits *“another country or city,”* she usually brings her digicam because she already anticipates wanting pictures for Instagram.

“If I am taking my digital camera to an event, I am for sure going to post pictures from it on Instagram as it is a special thing.” - Desi

Ludovica and Desi similarly reflected that some moments were simply not *“special enough”* for camera pictures and that mundane life at home would not feel significant enough to justify using the device.

These findings indicate that the digital Backstage extends beyond editing alone and includes the anticipation and selective organisation of experiences surrounding digicam use long before content becomes publicly visible online. Participants often reserved the digicam for moments perceived as aesthetically valuable, socially significant, or emotionally memorable, while mundane everyday situations were frequently excluded. In this sense, Backstage labour involved not only preparing content for the Front Stage afterwards, but also pre-selecting which experiences were considered worthy of being documented through the digicam in the first place. This resembles Goffman’s (1959) idea of understanding the Backstage as a space of preparation, rehearsal, and concealed labour, where individuals strategically organise performances before presenting a coherent identity to an audience. At the same time, the digicam itself became part of this preparatory process, also framed as identity-kit (Belk, 1988), functioning as what Belk (1988) describes as an identity-related possession through which participants organised, anticipated, and performed desired versions of themselves. shaping which moments and experiences were anticipated, organised, and eventually performed on the Instagram Front Stage.

5.4.3 Signalling distinction through the visible digicam aesthetic

Then, when it comes to posting digicam pictures on Instagram, the need for social distinction reappeared throughout the interviews. This practice moves between the Front Stage and Backstage, as participants deliberately prepare and select visual markers of digicam use while simultaneously displaying them publicly as part of their online identity.

Paula clearly illustrates this when explaining that in her pictures *"you can see the date"* and therefore *"you can clearly tell that it's [from] a digital camera"*. Siana added that:

"Even when I aim for a 'semi-professional' look using flash and styling, you're not gonna know if it's [from] a [digital camera], which is why I want the date stamp on the picture to make it more visible that it was taken with the device; I need it, I want it."

In this sense, the visible date stamp functions as a recognisable marker of the device itself, signalling participation in a specific aesthetic and cultural practice. This resembles Belk's (1988) argument, drawing on Douglas and Isherwood (1979), that possessions can function as status markers through their rarity.

These findings suggest that participants actively try to make the use of the digicam visible and recognisable as part of their online identity. Visible markers such as timestamps, flash photography, grain, blur, and the camera itself therefore became symbolic signals of authenticity, nostalgia, and distinction within Instagram self-presentation.

5.4.4 Theme summary

The findings of this theme demonstrate that digicam photography became deeply integrated into participants' online identity performance on Instagram. Although participants frequently described the camera as more authentic and less performative than smartphone photography, the findings revealed extensive forms of curation, audience awareness, and impression management surrounding its use. In line with Goffman's (1959) idea of the "Front," participants carefully managed the visual aesthetics of their profiles, selectively presenting different versions of themselves across public and private audiences to maintain coherent online performances. At the same time, significant backstage labour remained hidden behind the seemingly effortless nostalgic aesthetic, including planning, aesthetic coordination, selective posting, and audience evaluation. Importantly, participants did not only curate the photographs themselves, but also strategically displayed visible markers of digicam use, such as timestamps, flash, grain, and imperfections, transforming the device into a symbolic marker of authenticity, distinction, and identity within hyper-digital culture.

6 Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how Gen Z makes sense of digicams as tools for identity construction in a hyper-digital age. To address this objective, the following research question was developed: *“How can we understand Gen Z's use of compact digital cameras?”*

This chapter places the findings into a broader theoretical and cultural context by reflecting on the meanings, paradoxes, and insights that emerged throughout the study. It connects the findings to existing literature streams by examining how they confirm, expand, or challenge previous research on nostalgic consumption, identity construction, retro media, and digital self-presentation. In addition, the chapter presents the practical implications that emerge from the findings.

6.1 Summary of the findings

To summarise the findings on a deeper level, it is necessary to look beyond the digicam as merely a photographic tool. Gen Z's use of digicams in a hyper-digital age can be understood as a practice of nostalgic identity construction operating across four interconnected dimensions. First, the camera is adopted because it connects participants to a communally imagined past. Second, it becomes integrated into the Extended Self through emotional investment, embodied use, and the creation of digital collections. Third, it enables a selective and controlled form of technological deceleration that resists smartphone overload without requiring complete analogue commitment. Finally, it functions as the primary prop for a carefully curated and paradoxically authentic Front Stage performance on Instagram.

What makes this phenomenon distinct from previous research on analogue revival is precisely its in-between position. The digicam is neither fully analogue nor fully digital, neither fully material nor fully immaterial, neither fully authentic nor fully performative. Instead, participants used the digicam to negotiate these tensions simultaneously. In this sense, Gen Z consumers are not simply returning to outdated technology, but actively reinterpreting retro digital tools to meet contemporary identity and emotional needs.

One of the most significant puzzles emerging from this study is that participants experienced digicams as slower, richer, and more emotionally meaningful than smartphones, despite both devices producing fully digital images. Although the digicam fits in a pocket, produces low-resolution images, and was considered technologically obsolete less than two decades ago, participants deliberately and repeatedly returned to it. Understanding why Gen Z does

this reveals broader tensions surrounding technology, identity, time, and the self within a world that moves too fast to feel real. The following paragraph further explores these tensions.

6.2 Beyond the digicam: the broader phenomenon

Ultimately, the findings extend beyond cameras themselves. The central insight of this thesis concerns what nostalgic consumption reveals about life in a hyper-digital age. Within the context of technological deceleration, retro objects function as material and aesthetic tools through which consumers attempt to slow down, reclaim presence, and restore emotional depth to experiences that digital immediacy tends to flatten. This also challenges dominant assumptions surrounding technological progress. Contemporary digital culture frequently assumes that efficiency, speed, and frictionlessness are universally desirable, and that the “best” technology is the one that removes the greatest number of obstacles. However, the findings of this study suggest otherwise. Participants did not seek the complete removal of friction, but rather the “right” amount of friction: enough to feel intentional, emotionally engaged, and present, but not so much that the process became overly complicated.

This helps explain a range of adjacent consumer phenomena, such as vinyl listening and collecting, analogue journaling, second-hand shopping, meditation, or silent retreats among consumers who have no intention of fully disconnecting from digital life. In a world increasingly designed around efficiency and acceleration, a certain degree of friction appears to have become desirable to make experiences feel more intentional, emotionally meaningful, and real.

The findings further suggest that nostalgia is no longer simply a backward-looking emotion. Instead, it functions as a forward-facing identity tool. Participants in this study were not mourning a lost past because most of them never experienced the early 2000s as camera-using subjects. Rather, they used the aesthetics, atmosphere, and symbolic meanings associated with that period to construct identities in the present. In this sense, the digicam became a tool for re-enchanting digital life itself. As Dam, Hartmann and Brunk (2024) argue, nostalgia in contemporary consumer culture is less about remembering and more about becoming: it functions as a resource for identity work and as a way of borrowing emotional depth and cultural meaning from a past imagined as more authentic than the hyper-mediated present.

This phenomenon also changes how Instagram, and social media platforms more broadly, can be understood. Existing narratives often position Instagram as a platform for inauthenticity, encouraging idealised, filtered, performative versions of self-presentation. However, our findings complicate this understanding. Participants were deeply aware of the performative nature of Instagram while simultaneously remaining highly invested in appearing authentic, spontaneous, and effortless online. In this sense, the Front Stage was not experienced as a

betrayal of authenticity, but rather as a space where authenticity itself became carefully constructed and communicated to others. Following Goffman (1959) and Frei and Ulloa (2025), what appears externally as performance is simultaneously experienced internally as meaningful identity work. The digicam aesthetic is the primary prop through which that identity work is communicated and made to appear authentic.

Importantly, we noted that our participants' authenticity on Instagram is frequently communicated through the appearance of non-performance. Paradoxically, however, they remained highly aware of their own performances on Instagram while simultaneously engaging in elaborate, effortful, and strategically timed impression management to appear spontaneous online. In this sense, the imperfect aesthetic and performed spontaneity associated with digicam photography became new markers of authenticity among a generation fully aware of its own performance. Authenticity, therefore, was not experienced as the absence of performance, but increasingly as its most sophisticated form.

Seen in this light, the digicam became a small object carrying a large cultural argument. It demonstrates that nostalgia is no longer a backward glance but a forward-facing identity resource, that authenticity in digital culture is constructed rather than discovered, and that meaningful forms of consumption are often those that symbolically resist acceleration and reintroduce intentionality into everyday life. Understanding all of this can tell us something important not only about this generation, but also about what it means to be a self in the world we have built.

6.3 Theoretical contributions

As outlined in previous research on nostalgic consumption, there is a visible return of retro media practices (Magaudda and Minniti, 2019; Fernandez and Beverland, 2019; Ungdomsbarometern, 2025; Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt, 2024). Weingarten and Wei (2023) further show that nostalgia has become increasingly relevant within consumer behaviour research. The findings of our thesis contribute to this literature by extending existing understandings of nostalgic consumption.

In the literature review, we established that nostalgia is not limited to personally lived experiences, but may also emerge from longing for periods that precede one's own direct experience. Neave, Freemantle and Lappeman (2026) explain this through historical nostalgia, while Davis (1979) refers to it as communal nostalgia, where consumers value objects linked to a collective past they did not personally inhabit. The findings of our study both confirm and deepen these concepts in a previously undocumented empirical context.

Firstly, the use of a digicam emerged as a form of communal nostalgia (Davis, 1979), where Gen Z consumers used it to reconnect with family life and narratives rather than personal

memories using the device itself. In this sense, the findings resemble Han and Newman's (2022) observation that consumers may engage with retro objects linked to periods they did not directly experience, such as purchasing vinyl despite growing up with digital music. Our findings therefore suggest that communal and historical nostalgia (Davis, 1979; Neave, Freemantle and Lappeman, 2026) may also operate through specifically digital retro objects, extending existing literature on nostalgic consumption and retro media, which has largely focused on analogue technologies. These findings also nuance Whitehouse's (2023) discussion of consumers searching for authenticity through retro consumption. Rather than longing for a fully pre-digital world, participants appeared drawn toward an earlier form of digital culture associated with slower, more intentional, and emotionally meaningful ways of capturing and sharing experiences. In this sense, the findings suggest that communal nostalgia and authenticity may also operate through retro digital technologies rather than exclusively through analogue objects.

Similarly, Amatulli et al. (2018) argue that vintage products are perceived as authentic because they carry the values and cultural associations of a different era. Crucially, our findings demonstrate that this enchantment does not require analogue materiality or physical imperfection. Although digicam photographs remain fully digital, participants still experienced them as more authentic, atmospheric, and emotionally meaningful than smartphone photographs. Existing literature often positions aura as tied to analogue objects and physical artefacts, while digital possessions are described as lacking the "soft tactile characteristics" of material possessions (Benjamin, 1930/1968; Belk, 2006). However, our findings challenge this distinction by showing that participants attributed similar forms of aura and emotional resonance to a retro digital device.

One explanation lies in the symbolic value of the "imperfect aesthetic" within contemporary digital culture. Technical imperfections such as grain, blur, darkness, flash, and low image quality were not interpreted as flaws, but rather as markers of authenticity, emotional depth, and human presence. These imperfections appeared to convey feelings in ways that technically perfect images cannot. This strongly reflects Niemeyer's (2014) discussion of analogue nostalgia and resembles Zhu's (2025) observation that imperfect and analogue aesthetics may appear more "alive" or as "having a soul" compared to technically perfect digital imagery. Rather than rejecting digitality itself, participants embraced a specifically digital aesthetic that visually reproduced signs of age, temporality, and imperfection traditionally associated with analogue media.

This paradox further extended into participants' relationships with the photographs after they were taken. Many carefully archived SD cards or duplicated images, reproducing nostalgic forms of preservation traditionally associated with physical family collections. In this sense, participants did not simply store photographs digitally, but recreated older practices of archiving, preserving, and emotionally organising memories within digital environments.

Therefore, this thesis contributes to the literature streams on nostalgic consumption and retro media by showing that nostalgic consumption logic may operate through specifically digital

aesthetics rather than through analogue materiality alone. In this way, the study further contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding how the past continues to shape present-day consumer culture and markets (Dam, Hartmann and Brunk, 2024).

Secondly, the findings resonate strongly with Hartmann and Brunk's (2019) discussion of re-enchantment, where past-themed consumption practices reintroduce imagination and magic into highly rationalised and efficiency-oriented environments (Ritzer, 2004). Within our study, the digicam functioned as more than a tool for capturing photographs. Instead, it symbolised a more intentional and emotionally meaningful way of documenting socially valued moments, positioned in contrast to the speed, overstimulation and constant accessibility associated with smartphone culture. In this sense, our findings extend previous literature (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019; Brown et al., 2003; Brunk, Dagalp and Hartmann, 2020; Neave, Freemantle and Lappeman, 2026) by demonstrating that re-enchantment does not necessarily depend on fully analogue materiality, but may also emerge through retro digital aesthetics and practices.

Having established the nostalgic logic driving camera adoption, the findings further reveal how this nostalgia becomes materialised and extended into participants' sense of self through the mechanisms Belk (1988, 2013) describes. This allows us to contribute to nostalgia literature by demonstrating how nostalgic consumption simultaneously functions as identity construction. Belk (1988) argues that possessions become part of the Extended Self through the investment of "psychic energy", defined as time, attention, emotional attachment, and meaningful use. We connect this to Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt's (2024) argument that the appeal of legacy technologies is driven by consumer work involving effort, difficult skill acquisition, and labour-intensive practices. Our findings both confirm and challenge this argument in productive ways.

We confirm that effort and intentionality matter. Participants valued the digicam precisely because it required greater deliberateness than smartphone photography through carrying a separate device, more focused engagement during social experiences, fewer pictures, and delayed transfer. In this sense, the camera became integrated into the Extended Self because participants intentionally invested time, attention, and emotional energy into using it.

However, our findings simultaneously challenge the assumption that identity construction through retro technologies necessarily depends on maximum inconvenience or technical mastery. Participants actively rejected full analogue inconvenience, and several explicitly stated that they abandoned devices when these became too technically demanding. They chose the digicam because it balanced nostalgic imperfection with modern convenience, and several explicitly described abandoning cameras when they became too technically demanding. Instead, they preferred a balance between nostalgic imperfection and contemporary convenience. This suggests that the threshold of acceptable effort in retro consumption is not uniform across objects or consumers, and that identity-building through retro technology does not require mastery to be meaningful. This contradiction is particularly important because it demonstrates that not all retro technologies fulfil the same psychological function.

Therefore, we refine Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt's (2024) framework and propose our own concept of '*calibrated convenience*', referring to the idea that retro consumers seek a controllable degree of friction rather than maximum inconvenience. Importantly, participants did not reject digital technology altogether, but selectively slowed down specific parts of the photographic experience while remaining fully embedded within digital systems. Calibrated convenience therefore appears as a characteristic of hybrid retro digital objects occupying a symbolic middle ground between analogue and digital.

Thirdly, one of the most recurring findings concerns the symbolic distinction participants made between smartphones and digicams. Smartphones became associated with everyday stress, distraction, overconsumption, work, perfection, bad news, and emotional exhaustion, while the digicam became associated with emotional presence, memory-making, intentionality, and meaningful social experiences. Nadine's distinction between "nice memories" stored on the digicam and stressful everyday experiences associated with the smartphone illustrates this symbolic separation clearly. These extend Whitehouse's (2023) discussion of vinyl listening as a separate device for meaningful leisure consumption, as well as Fernandez and Beverland (2019) and Zhong and Wu (2023), who argue that consumers seek single-purpose devices to separate meaningful experiences from overstimulating digital environments.

These findings also have broader implications for how the digicam should be theorised relative to other retro media. Because the digicam produces digital rather than physical artefacts while simultaneously requiring relatively low levels of technical mastery, it sits at the edge of what existing retro media theory can explain (Zhu, 2025; Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt, 2024; Belk, 1988; Zhong and Wu, 2023; Niemeyer, 2014), and in each case, our findings push the theory forward. The thesis therefore positions the digicam as a limit case that reveals the outer boundaries of existing frameworks and generates new theoretical questions about the relationship between effort, materiality, and identity in retro consumption.

The next dimension of the discussion concerns identity performance on Instagram and what happens to nostalgia when it enters the platform. The literature review established that nostalgia can be understood as a market-mediated cultural resource that is co-constructed and activated through consumption (Dam, Hartmann and Brunk, 2024), while Instagram functions as a platform where identity is not simply expressed, but actively constructed through curation and selective self-presentation (Frei and Ulloa, 2025). The findings bring these ideas together by showing that nostalgia on Instagram increasingly functions as a Front Stage performance.

Goffman's concepts of Front Stage, Backstage, impression management, and dramatic realisation translate productively into the Instagram context. Participants clearly divided their digital lives into Front Stage and Backstage regions, using their Instagram feeds as curated public performances while simultaneously treating the digicam as a Backstage repository for private and unperformed moments. The digicam itself became the primary prop through which nostalgic identity is staged. Visible aesthetic markers such as grain, blur, flash, and timestamp functioned as what Goffman (1959) calls sign-vehicles, communicating specific

identity claims to an audience. Importantly, the Front Stage did not begin only when participants uploaded photographs. Instead, impression management frequently started much earlier in the Backstage process when participants decided whether experiences were “camera-worthy” or “Instagram-worthy”. Siana described planning aesthetics months before events, while Elena explained that she often anticipated future Instagram posting before travelling.

In this sense, impression management extended backwards in time into the preparation of experiences themselves, rather than being limited to post-production editing. Participants also engaged in significant Backstage labour involving “dirty work” or hidden digital acts, such as editing, timing uploads, aesthetic coordination, and seeking social approval before posting. Paradoxically, the nostalgic aesthetic participants described as authentic and effortless often depended on extensive backstage labour and careful impression management behind the scenes. The findings therefore extend and modernise Goffman’s framework by demonstrating that contemporary digital impression management increasingly involves the performance of non-performance itself. Authenticity on Instagram was not experienced as the absence of curation, but rather as a carefully constructed appearance of spontaneity. Moreover, we re-interpret and modernise Goffman's concept of dramatic realisation as participants’ Instagram accounts selectively highlighted aspects of their lives that confirmed the identity they wished to project, while suppressing inconsistent characteristics.

Finally, this leads us to our last contribution to nostalgia literature: our own concept of *performed nostalgia*. Existing nostalgia research, including Dam, Hartmann and Brunk (2024) and Hartmann and Brunk (2019), primarily focuses on how nostalgic consumption creates internal emotional states such as re-enchantment, identity restoration, and sociohistoric continuity. However, our findings demonstrate that, on Instagram, nostalgia also functions as an external performance directed at a visible audience.

The nostalgic aesthetic of the digicam is not only *felt* by participants, but it is *staged* for followers, and the effectiveness of the staging depends on its unmediated and spontaneous appearance. This extends the nostalgia literature into the domain of digital self-presentation and suggests that, in an Instagram context, nostalgic consumption and Goffmanian performance are not separate phenomena, but two sides of the same identity practice.

6.4 Practical implications

The findings suggest that brands targeting Gen Z consumers may benefit less from emphasising technical superiority and more from communicating nostalgia, intentionality, and emotional meaning. For brands such as Fujifilm, Canon, or Kodak, this indicates that marketing strategies centred around atmosphere, memory-making, and aesthetic experience

may resonate more strongly than traditional positioning focused exclusively on efficiency or image quality.

The findings further suggest that consumers engaging with retro technologies do not necessarily seek maximum inconvenience or fully analogue experiences. Instead, participants valued what this study conceptualised as “*calibrated convenience*”. Participants appreciated carrying a separate device and slowing down parts of the photographic experience, while simultaneously rejecting the technical complexity and labour-intensive processes associated with analogue photography. Brands attempting to capitalise on retro trends may therefore benefit from combining nostalgic symbolism with modern convenience rather than fully replicating analogue processes.

In addition, retro technologies function as tools for identity performance and social distinction. Participants deliberately wanted others to recognise that photographs were taken with a digicam, suggesting that the symbolic visibility of the product itself forms part of its value. This implies that retro products should not only be designed for functionality, but also for symbolic visibility within digital culture. Preserving recognisable imperfections and nostalgic design cues may therefore strengthen the symbolic value consumers attach to such products.

For social media marketers and brand strategists, our findings suggest that Gen Z consumers on Instagram are simultaneously highly aware of their own performance and deeply invested in it by showing a sophisticated, reflexive identity project. Therefore, brands that acknowledge and celebrate this reflexivity rather than pretending that self-presentation is effortless will resonate more strongly with this audience than brands that market idealistic, aspirational content that erases the labour of identity construction.

More broadly, the findings indicate that younger consumers increasingly seek more intentional, emotionally meaningful, and controllable relationships with technology. For brands operating in highly digitalised markets, this suggests that future innovation may depend not only on technological advancement, but also on creating products and experiences that feel emotionally engaging, human, and capable of temporarily resisting the overstimulation associated with hyper-digital life.

7. Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate a mystery that first emerged at a student gathering in Lund, questioning why a young, digitally native consumer would voluntarily wait 24 hours for lower-quality photographs in a world where her smartphone could produce unlimited, instant, high-resolution images in seconds. As we began noticing this pattern among peers and across Instagram, the phenomenon gradually revealed a broader tension that existing literature on nostalgic consumption, analogue revival, and retro media could not fully explain: digitally native Gen Z consumers are drawn toward digicams from the early 2000s.

The research question guiding this thesis was: *"How can we understand Gen Z's use of compact digital cameras?"*

The answer, as this thesis demonstrates, is that Gen Z's use of digicams is best understood as a practice of nostalgic identity construction. The camera is adopted through communal nostalgia, reflecting a longing for a collectively imagined past and an idealised pre-smartphone atmosphere, while simultaneously becoming tied to lived experiences from childhood and family memory. It becomes integrated into the Extended Self through emotional investment, embodied use, and the curation of both digital and physical collections. Furthermore, the digicam enables a selective and controlled form of technological deceleration, or what we conceptualised as *calibrated convenience*, resisting smartphone overload without requiring full analogue commitment. Moreover, it functions as the primary prop for a carefully curated, paradoxically authentic Front Stage performance on Instagram, where the imperfect aesthetic is not simply felt but strategically staged through significant backstage labour surrounding planning, timing, and curation. At the same time, participants visibly signalled the use of the digicam itself through flash, grain, timestamps, and imperfections, transforming the device into a symbolic marker of authenticity and distinction within hyper-digital culture.

This thesis makes several contributions to existing literature. First, it extends the concept of communal and historical nostalgia (Davis, 1979; Neave, Freemantle and Lappeman, 2026) into a previously undocumented context by demonstrating that this nostalgic logic can operate through a specifically digital aesthetic characterised by grain, blur, flash, and low resolution rather than through film, prints, or analogue materiality. Second, the study challenges the assumption that re-enchantment and aura require analogue or physical objects (Niemeyer, 2014; Belk, 2006; Benjamin, 1930/1968) by showing that a fully digital device can carry emotional resonance and become integrated into the Extended Self when embedded within meaningful practices, memory, and intentional use. Third, the thesis introduces our own concept of *calibrated convenience*, refining Beverland, Fernandez, and Eckhardt's (2024)

framework of consumer work and mastery in analogue revival, by demonstrating that, for digital retro objects, identity construction does not require maximum inconvenience but rather a controllable and meaningful degree of friction. Fourth, the study introduces our own concept of *performed nostalgia* to nostalgia literature. This finding shows that on Instagram, the nostalgic aesthetic is not merely experienced internally but is actively staged for an audience, with the effectiveness of the performance depending on its appearing effortless and unmediated.

This study is subject to several important limitations. Methodologically, all participants were women, as male Gen Z users actively engaging in digicam practices were difficult to identify and recruit. The study therefore cannot speak to whether gender shapes the meanings and motivations attached to digicam use, and this remains an open empirical question. The reliance on convenience and snowball sampling through existing social networks further resulted in a participant group that, despite national diversity, was relatively similar in social and cultural terms: university-educated, internationally mobile, and culturally engaged. This homogeneity matters theoretically, because identity construction through aesthetic consumption is not socially neutral. The practices that we documented here, like deliberate aesthetic distinction, Instagram curation, and others, may be specific to socially and culturally privileged Gen Z consumers rather than representative of the generation as a whole.

Future research should therefore examine how digicam practices and their meanings vary across more socially and culturally diverse Gen Z populations, including differences in gender, class, educational background, and geographic settings outside Europe. It would be particularly productive to compare students and non-students, or participants embedded in non-Western Instagram cultures, where the meanings of imperfection, authenticity, and nostalgic aesthetics may be constructed and performed differently. Finally, future studies may extend the framework developed in this thesis to other retro digital objects occupying an ambiguous position between analogue nostalgia and contemporary digital culture, such as digital video recorders or portable cassette players that combine nostalgic aesthetics with contemporary digital convenience. Longitudinal research could further investigate how the meanings attached to these objects evolve as the trend becomes either more mainstream or less culturally visible over time, while also examining whether concepts such as *calibrated convenience* and *performed nostalgia* operate more broadly within consumer culture.

References

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:

- Amatulli, C., Pino, G., Angelis, M. D., & Cascio, R. (2018). Understanding Purchase Determinants of Luxury Vintage Products. *Psychology & Marketing*, 35, pp. 616-624. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21110>
- Baker, A.J. (2009). Mick or Keith: blended identity of online rock fans. *Identity in the Information Society*, 2(1), pp.7–21. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12394-009-0015-5>.
- Belk, R.W. (1982), "Acquiring, Possessing, and Collecting: Fundamental Processes in Consumer Behavior," *Marketing Theory: Philosophy of Science Perspectives*, eds. Ronald F. Bushard and Shelby D. Hunt, Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, 185-190.
- Belk, R.W. (1988). Possessions and the Extended Self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(2), pp.139–168. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1086/209154>.
- Belk, R.W. (1990). The Role of Possessions In Constructing and Maintaining A Sense of Past. In: M.E. Goldberg, G. Gorn and R.W. Pollay, eds. *Advances in Consumer Research Volume 17*. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, pp. 669–676. Available at: <https://scispace.com/pdf/the-role-of-posessions-in-constructing-and-maintaining-a-titihlqdv9.pdf>
- Belk, R.W. (2006), “Remembrances of Things Past: Silent Voices in Collections,” in *European Advances in Consumer Research*, ed. Karin Ekstrom and Helene Brembeck, Valdosa, GA: Association for Consumer Research, 392–97.
- Belk, R.W. (2013). Extended Self in a Digital World. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(3), pp.477–500. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/671052>
- Benjamin, W. (1930/1968), “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & World, 59–67.
- Beverland, M.B., Fernandez, K.V. & Eckhardt, G.M. (2024). Consumer Work and Agency in the Analog Revival. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 51(4). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucae003>.
- Brown, S., Kozinets, R. V., & Sherry, J. F. (2003). Teaching old brands new tricks: Retro branding and the revival of brand meaning. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(3), 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.67.3.19.18657>.

- Brunk, K.H., Dagalp, I. & Hartmann, B.J. (2020). The Aestheticization of Past-Themed Consumption. *Advances in Consumer Research*, [online] 48, pp.509–511. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361528905_The_aestheticization_of_past-themed_consumption
- Bullingham, L. and Vasconcelos, A.C. (2013). The Presentation of Self in the Online world': Goffman and the Study of Online Identities. *Journal of Information Science*, 39(1), pp.101–112. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551512470051>.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Rochberg-Halton, E. (1981), *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO978113916761>.
- Dam, C., Hartmann, B.J. & Brunk, K.H. (2024). Marketing the past: a literature review and future directions for researching retro, heritage, nostalgia, and vintage. MM. *Journal of marketing management*, 40(9-10), pp.1–25.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2024.2339454>.
- Davis, F. (1979). *Yearning for yesterday: A sociology of nostalgia*. New York: Free Press.
- Dodgson, L. (2024). Gen Z is bringing back digital cameras and post-night-out photo dumps. [online] *Business Insider*. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/digital-cameras-are-back-thanks-to-gen-z-nostalgia-retro-2024-5>.
- Douglas, M. & Isherwood, B. (1979), *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, New York: W.W. Norton.
- Fernandez, K.V. & Beverland, M.B. (2019). As the record spins: materialising connections. *European Journal of Marketing*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-12-2016-0828>.
- Frei, R. & Ulloa, F. (2025). Testing the Self: Digital Trials and Identity Work on Instagram. *International Journal of Communication*, 19 (2025). Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/23058>
- Furby, L. (1978), "Sharing: Decisions and Moral Judgments About Letting Others Use One's Possessions," *Psychological Reports*, 43 (2), 595-609.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmate As*. London: Penguin Books.
- Han, M. & Newman, GE. (2022): Seeking stability: Consumer motivations for communal Nostalgia. *Journal Consum Psychology* 2022, 32(1):77–86, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1237>.
- Hartmann, B.J. & Brunk, K.H. (2019). Nostalgia marketing and (re-)enchantment. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 36(4), pp.669–686.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2019.05.002>.

- Holt, D. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(1), 70–90. <https://doi.org/10.1086/339922>.
- Huang, K. (2023). The Hottest Gen Z Gadget is a 20-Year-Old Digital Camera. [online] *The Seattle Times*. Available at: <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/the-hottest-gen-z-gadget-is-a-20-year-old-digital-camera/>.
- Husemann, K.C. & Eckhardt, G.M. (2018). Consumer Deceleration. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 45(6), pp.1142–1163. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy047>.
- Instagram.com. (2017). *Julia Helm (@juliahlml)* • Instagram photos and videos. [online] Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/juliahlml/>
- James, W. (1890). *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, New York: Henry Holt. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/10538-000>.
- Kurian, S. (2026). The return of the DigiCam and the slightly bad photo. [online] *Thenodmag.com*. Available at: <https://thenodmag.com/content/digicams-point-and-shoot-camera-analogue-era-gen-z>
- Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Magaudda, P. & Minniti, S. (2019). Retromedia-in-practice: A practice theory approach for rethinking old and new media technologies. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 25(4), pp.673–693. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519842805>
- Magaudda, P. (2011), “When Materiality ‘Bites Back’: Digital Music Consumption in the Age of Dematerialization,” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11 (1), 16–36. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540510390499>.
- Magaudda, P. (2012), “What Happens to Materiality in Digital Virtual Consumption?” in *Digital Virtual Consumption*, ed. Mike Molesworth and Janice Denegri-Knott, London: Routledge, 111–26. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203114834-13>.
- Neave, C., Freemantle, H. & Lappeman, J. (2026). ‘But you weren’t there!’ – Effects of historical nostalgia on young consumers. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 43(1) doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-12-2024-7467>.
- Niemeyer, K. ed., 2014. *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137375889>.
- Ritzer, G. (2004) *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Ritzer, G. (2005). *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi: Pine Forge.

Schwarz, O. (2009). Good Young Nostalgia. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 9(3), pp.348–376. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540509342045>.

Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., Routledge, C., Arndt, J., Hepper, E.G. & Zhou, X. (2015). To nostalgize: Mixing memory with affect and desire. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 51(1), pp.189–273. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2014.10.001>.

Tuan, Y. (1984), *Dominance & Affection: The Making of Pets*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ungdomsbarometern (2025). *Swedish Youth's Trends: A trend forecast based on 17,000 voices*. Available online: <https://mb.cision.com/Main/23312/4167459/3518124.pdf>

Waggoner, Z (2009). *My avatar, my self: Identity in video role-playing games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009, p. 1.

Weingarten, E. & Wei, Z. (2023). *Nostalgia and Consumer Behavior*. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 49(1), p.101555. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101555>.

Whitehouse, S. (2023). ‘Taking a chance on a record’: lost vinyl consumption practices in the age of music streaming. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 26(1), pp.1–17. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2022.2134124>.

Zhong, W. and Wu, W. (2023). Vintage cameras: young people’s nostalgic practices on social media and the pursuit of identity in contemporary China. *Journal of Youth Studies*, pp.1–17. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2271847>.

Zhu, Y. (2025). Analog photography enhances identity, well-being, and social connection, in Southeastern China. *Scientific Reports*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-32663-x>.

Methods:

Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research and theory development: mystery as method*. SAGE Publications.

Bell, E., Bryman, A. & Harley, B. (2022). *Business Research Methods*. 6th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Carson, D., Gilmore, A., Perry, C. & Gronhaug, K. (2001). *Qualitative marketing research*. London: Sage Publications.

Diener, E., & Crandall, R. (1978). *Ethics in Social and Behavioural Research*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., Jackson, P. & Jaspersen, L.J. (2021). *Management & Business Research*. 7th ed. Los Angeles: Sage.

Egan-Wyer, C. (2025). Messy customer journey self-mapping: A qualitative method for the future of second-hand retail and consumption. *The International Review of Retail*,

Distribution and Consumer Research, pp.1–23.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/09593969.2025.2596201>.

Golden-Biddle, K. & Locke, K. (1993) ‘Appealing work: an investigation of how ethnographic texts convince’, *Organization Science*, 4 (4): pp. 595–616.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.4.4.595>.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). ‘Competing paradigms in qualitative research’, in N.K. Denzin and Y.S Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Harrison, M., Rhodes, T. & Lancaster, K. (2024). Object-oriented interviews in qualitative longitudinal research. *Qualitative research*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241255248>.

Johnson, P. & Duberley, J. (2000). *Understanding Management Research: An Introduction to Epistemology*. London: SAGE Publications

Johnson, P., Buehring, A., Cassell, C. M., & Symon, G. (2006). ‘Evaluating Qualitative Management Research: Towards a Contingent Criteriology’, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 8: 131-56. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2006.00124.x>.

King, N. and Brooks, J.M., 2017. *Template Analysis for Business and Management Students*. London: SAGE Publications. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983304>.

King, N., 2004. Using Templates in the Thematic Analysis of Text. In: C. Cassell and G. Symon, eds. *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. London: SAGE Publications, pp. 256–270. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446280119.n21>.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>.

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H. & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in Qualitative Research: Exploring Its Conceptualization and Operationalization. *Quality & Quantity*, 52(4), pp.1893–1907.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8>.

Tabari, S., King, N. & Egan, D. (2020). Potential application of template analysis in qualitative hospitality management research. *Hospitality & Society*.
doi:https://doi.org/10.1386/hosp_00020_1.

van Dijck, J. (2008). Digital photography: communication, identity, memory. *Visual Communication*, 7(1), pp.57–76. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357207084865>.

Appendix A: Declaration of AI use

This research made use of AI tools at several stages of the research and writing process. Grammarly was used throughout for grammatical correction, spelling, and basic language refinement. Perplexity and Scopus AI were used as writing and thinking aids. These tools were used to identify and verify the peer-reviewed status of sources and to search for and suggest relevant academic literature. Furthermore, Claude (Anthropic), ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini (Google) were used to improve the flow of academic writing, identify repetition, check grammar, support paraphrasing to improve readability and coherence, and to provide critical feedback on the structure and consistency of different chapters. In addition, these AI tools were used to evaluate alternative analytical frameworks, refine interview questions by identifying potential leading formulations, iterate sections of the theoretical framework, discussion, contributions, practical implications, and methodology chapters based on our own arguments and empirical findings, and support ideation and the theoretical synthesis by connecting Belk's Extended Self and Goffman's theories to the empirical data.

Notebook LM was used with source materials to identify relevant ideas and chapters for further exploration. Importantly, all sources included in the thesis were read and interpreted independently by us, while AI tools were used only to assist in locating potentially relevant sections within the literature.

In all cases, AI-generated suggestions and text were critically evaluated, substantially edited, and integrated into our own analytical work, writing style, and academic argumentation. All interpretations, theoretical contributions, and conclusions presented in this thesis remain our independent intellectual work. AI tools supported the processes of writing, reflection, and organisation, but did not replace independent academic thinking or analysis.

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Pilot interviews)

Instruction to participants: Please bring your digital camera to the interview.

First questions to ask:

- What is your age and nationality?
- What camera are you using? (name and type)
- Do we have your permission to record the session?
- Do we have permission to use your first name and the picture we took in our study?
-

Opening Questions “icebreakers”

Goal: Make the participant feel comfortable by breaking the ice and setting the scene for the topic we will discuss.

- P: Thank you for bringing your digital camera. Can you show me one of your favourite photos you have taken with it? Tell me the story of that moment.
 - S: Connection to emotion/experience: What made you take this picture? How do you feel about the picture looking at it now?

Topic 1 - Materiality and the Extended Self

Goal: To establish the digital camera as a meaningful, physical possession and uncover the difference in the experience of using it versus a smartphone.

- P: What is your first memory of a digital camera?
- P: Where did you get your digital camera from? (Bought yourself, given by your parents/family, gift from friends?)
- P: Think back to the time you decided: “I need to buy a digital camera for my pictures.” What did you want to achieve with it, and why couldn't you do it with the smartphone tools you had until that moment?
 - S: When you were looking to buy your specific digital camera, what aspects were important for you?
- P: Walk me through how you decide: in what moments do you choose to take a photo with your phone, and when do you choose to use your digital camera instead?
 - Laddering down: Could you give me an example?
- P: What meaning does using the digital camera add to that moment or to the memory of it (instead of using your phone camera)?
 - S: What is it about that specific moment that makes it feel suitable to use the digital camera?

- P: Extended self - possessions (Belk): When you are out with friends, how does the physical act of holding your digital camera or having it around your neck change the way you feel compared to just having your phone in your pocket?
- P: Extended Self - rituals (Belk): How does the physical act of carrying, holding and hearing the digital camera click change your experience of photographing/taking the picture compared to just tapping on your smartphone?
 - Probe: Probably they will say they like the aesthetics, so we can ask: “Is it only the aesthetics that made you get the digital camera, or is there another reason that made you get the digital camera?”

Topic 2 - The logic of Distinction (Co-constructed Meaning & Performance)

Goal: To understand the process, effort, social meaning and distinction created with the digital camera aesthetic for an Instagram audience.

- P: Walk us through the work of getting the photo from the SD card to your feed.
 - S: How long do you wait after you take the photos until you download/transfer them? And why?
- P: What kind of photos from your digital camera do you post on Instagram (friends, landscapes, moments, etc.)?
- P: When you see another person's photo on Instagram, how do you know it was taken with a digital camera and not a phone filter?
 - Laddering up: What do you think this visual style signals or communicates about the person who posted it?
- P: Do you feel you need to explicitly signal to your followers that you used a digital camera (e.g., in the caption, a tag, etc.), or does the photo's look speak for itself?
 - If the answer is yes → How do you show that?

Topic 3 - The collection as part of the Extended Self

Goal: Diving deeper into how the collection of digital photos on Instagram forms the extended self.

- P: (Let them open their Instagram page here.) If you could only keep two pictures on your profile forever and had to delete every other picture, which ones would you keep?
 - Laddering up: What makes you choose these pictures?
- P: When you look at your overall Instagram feed, which photos feel more like the ‘real’ you, and why?
- P: If you stopped using your digital camera tomorrow, would the way you express yourself change?
 - Laddering up: Would the things and moments you take pictures change?

Closing Questions - Space for questions and make him/her feel appreciated

- We have gone through our main questions. We are curious: why do you think your generation (Gen Z) is increasingly using digital cameras instead of the newest phone tech?

- Appreciation: Thank you so much for participating in this interview and sharing your stories. Looking at your feed and hearing your perspective on how you blend the physical and digital world is incredibly helpful for our understanding of how students here at Lund University are building their identity through the use of digital cameras on Instagram.
- Is there anything about your relationship with your digital camera or your Instagram that we haven't talked about today?

Appendix C: Interview Guide (Main interviews)

Instruction to participants: Please bring your digital camera to the interview.

First questions to ask:

- What is your age and nationality?
- What camera are you using? (name and type)
- Do we have your permission to record the session?
- Do we have permission to use your first name and the picture we took in our thesis?

Opening Questions “icebreakers”

Goal: Make the participant feel comfortable by breaking the ice and setting the scene for the topic we will discuss.

- P: Thank you for bringing your digital camera. Can you show me one of your favourite photos you have taken with it? Tell me the story of that moment.
 - S: Connection to emotion/experience: What made you take this picture? How do you feel about the picture looking at it now?

Topic 1 - Belk: Materiality, The Extended Self, and the Identity-Kit

Goal: To establish the digital camera as a meaningful, physical possession and uncover the difference in the experience of using it versus a smartphone.

Subtopic 1: Heirloom and the camera as a family object

- P: What is your first memory of a digital camera?
- P: Where did you get your digital camera from? (Bought yourself, given by your parents/family, gift from friends?)
- P: Think back to the time you decided: “I need to buy a digital camera for my pictures.” What did you want to achieve with it, and why couldn't you do it with the smartphone tools you had until that moment?
 - S: When you were looking to buy your specific digital camera, what was important for you?

Subtopic 2: Camera as part of the identity

- P: Walk me through how you decide: in what moments do you choose to take a photo with your phone, and when do you choose to use your digital camera instead?
 - Laddering down: Could you give me an example?
- P: What kind of photos/objects do you photograph with your digital camera (friends, landscapes, moments, etc.)?

- P: How does the physical act of carrying, holding and hearing the digital camera click change your experience compared to just tapping on your phone screen?
- P: What role, if any, does the aesthetic play in your decision to use the camera?

Subtopic 3: Degree of control over an object and the mastery of the skill

- P: Walk us through the work of getting the photo from the SD card to your Instagram feed.
- P: Is your routine of taking pictures with your camera different than taking pictures with your phone?
 - S: How did this routine become part of your life?
 - Tell me about the moment you first felt 'competent' using this device.
- P: How does using your digital camera help you express yourself?

Subtopic 4: Nostalgia

- P: What meaning does using the digital camera add to that moment or memory compared to using your phone?
 - S: What is it about that specific moment that makes it feel suitable to use the digital camera?
- P: If you take a picture you have taken with your phone and imagine you have taken it with the digital camera would the story behind and the feeling you have for the picture change?
- P: Do you look back at pictures from your digital camera? And do you do the same for pictures on your phone?
 - If yes, How often?
- Do you take your pictures in a way that you explicitly signal that you used a digital camera (e.g., leaving the date on the picture.), or does the photo's look speak for itself?
 - If the answer is yes → How do you show that?

Subtopic 5: Collections in the digital world

- P: (Let them open their Instagram page here.) If you could only keep two pictures on your profile forever and had to delete every other picture, which ones would you keep?
 - Laddering up: What makes you choose these pictures?

Subtopic 6: Dematerialisation

- After taking a 'retro' digital photo, do you ever feel the need to make it physical (e.g.: printing)?
 - Ladder up: Why is the digital file enough and different from any other digital photo on your phone?

Subtopic 7: Identity-kit

- P: When you're in a group and everyone pulls out a phone to take a group photo, but you pull out your digital camera, what does that moment feel like? What does it 'say' about you in that group?
- P: If your digital camera was taken away from you now, what would change for you?
 - Laddering up: Would the things and moments you take pictures change?

Topic 2 - Goffman: Performance and the presentation of identity

Goal: To understand how Instagram functions a platform for performing identity through the use of digicams.

Subtopic 8: Frontstage and backstage

- P: What pictures taken with your camera do you decide to post?
- P: Are there pictures you would never post? Why?
- P: How do you prepare a post (e.g.: how many pictures, carousel or not, thinking about the caption etc.), and how long does it take you?
 - S: Do you edit these pictures?
- P: Do you visit and reorder/delete pictures from your Instagram? → Explain
- P: When you look back at the photos on your camera versus what you eventually post, what criteria do you use to decide what stays 'private' and what becomes 'public'?

Subtopic 9: The mask

- P: How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you?
- P: How would you ideally like to be seen by others on Instagram?
- P: If a stranger looked at your Instagram for 30 seconds, what three characteristics/adjectives would they think are most representing you? Is this what identity you strive to build actually?

Subtopic 10: Audience

- P: What happens if you post a 'regular' phone photo—does it feel like you're breaking character?
- P: Do you pay attention to the statistics of your posts (e.g: likes, comments, views)
- P: If you feel comfortable, do you mind sharing with us which pictures were liked the most by your audience (by liked it does not necessarily mean number of likes but it can be interactions, etc.) ?

Closing Questions - Space for questions and make him/her feel appreciated

- We have gone through our main questions. We are curious: why do you think your generation (Gen Z) is increasingly using digital cameras instead of the newest phone tech?
- Appreciation: Thank you so much for participating in this interview and sharing your stories. Looking at your feed and hearing your perspective on how you blend the physical and digital world is incredibly helpful for our understanding of Gen Z is building their identity through the use of digital cameras on Instagram.

- Is there anything about your relationship with your digital camera or your Instagram that we haven't talked about today?