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Research Article

Postmodern consumer identity projects on social media: Skincare consumer tribe

Sosyal medyada postmodern tüketici kimliği projeleri: Cilt bakım tüketici topluluğu

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Abstract

This study extends Gergen's concept of the "saturated self," which refers to the loss of authentic self due to the use of digital technologies, into the realm of the skin care consumer tribe. It aims to explore how consumers' consumption-based relationships on social media shape their identity. We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with skincare enthusiasts who follow social media influencers producing skincare content. We utilised hermeneutical analysis to interpret the findings in the light of postmodern consumer identity projects. Our study reveals an identity transformation: consumers' naive identity transforms in the fragmented nature of social media amid the multiplicity of voices and conflicting information, yielding a more informed and discerning consumer identity. Even though we have not observed a 'saturated self' within the skin care consumer tribe, this new identity still experiments with different values in social media trends and faces dilemmas. We contribute to the growing research stream on identity projects of consumers, one of the key research areas within consumer culture theory, by demonstrating the agency of postmodern consumers on social media. These consumers critically analyse whom to follow on social media and prioritise their values so that Gergen's "saturated self" is not realised in this tribe.

Keywords: Saturated Self, Consumer Identity Projects, Social Media

Jel Codes: M31, L82, M39

Öz

Bu çalışma Gergen'nin "doymuş benlik", dijital teknoloji kullanımına bağlı olarak gerçek benliğin yok olması, konseptini cilt bakım tüketici topluluğu alanına uygulamaktadır. Çalışmada tüketicilerin sosyal medyadaki tüketim odaklı ilişkilerinin, kimliklerini nasıl şekillendirdiğini keşfetme amacı güdülmektedir. Cilt bakım içeriği üreten sosyal medya fenomenlerini takip eden, 13 cilt bakımı tutkunu kişiyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme gerçekleştirdik. Postmodern tüketici kimlikleri çerçevesinde bulguları yorumlamak için hermenötik analiz uyguladık. Çalışmamız kimlik dönüşümünü ortaya koymaktadır; tüketicilerin saf kimlikleri, çok sesli ve birbiri ile çelişen bilginin yer aldığı sosyal medyanın parçalanmış doğasında, akıllı tüketici kimliğine dönüşmektedir. Cilt bakım topluluğunda 'doymuş benlik' gözlemlememiş olsak da yine de bu yeni kimlik, sosyal medya trendlerinin sunduğu farklı değerleri denemekte ve ikilemler yaşamaktadır. Postmodern tüketicilerin sosyal medyada eyleme geçme kapasitelerini ortaya koyarak tüketim kültürü teorisinde önemli bir araştırma alanı olan tüketici kimliği projeleri araştırmalarına katkı sağlamaktayız. Bu tüketiciler kimi takip edeceğini kritik bir şekilde analiz etmekte ve Gergen'nin "doymuş benlik" kavramının gerçekleşmemesinin nedeni olarak değerlerini önceliklendirmektedirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Doymuş Benlik, Tüketici Kimliği Projeleri, Sosyal Medya

Jel Kodları: M31, L82, M39

Introduction

Trends, such as wellness and sustainability (NielsenIQ, 2024), are changing how brands compete in today's market while impacting consumers' lives and society. Keeping up with the trends is significant for brands to adapt to changing circumstances and make a difference in the competitive environment. Also, trends such as wellness have various implications for consumers' lives as they are intertwined with their value systems (Thompson & Troester, 2002). The Cambridge Dictionary defines a trend as "a general development or change in a situation or how people behave." Even though the Cambridge Dictionary lists "fad," "craze," and "fashion" as examples of synonyms of the word "trend," Letscher (1990) admits trend as a development but discriminates between "fads" and "trends" in fundamental ways within marketing literature and proposes guidelines for distinguishing them. According to these guidelines, trends align with consumers' fundamental values and lifestyles. Second, following a trend improves one area of consumers' lives and expands to other places. Third, fads are inflexible, while trends are open to modification by different groups of people to incorporate their lives. Lastly, adopting a trend is not limited to influential people but involves adaptation from unexpected consumer groups (Letscher, 1990). Following the guidelines of Letscher (1990), we discriminate between fads and trends, emphasising trends in the marketplace.

Social media, as a part of Web 2.0 technologies, has drastically changed how trends come to life and their potential to reach the masses. In other words, it has fundamentally changed the dynamics of trend-setting. Content creators, social media influencers (SMIs), and brands continuously disseminate trends over social media (Flora, 2023). Media outlets regularly share trend forecasts for brands to enhance customer loyalty and create meaningful consumer engagement (Calin, 2024). We are intrigued by this real-world phenomenon (MacInnis, Morwitz, Botti, Hoffman, Kozinets, Lehmann, Lynch & Pechmann, 2020) that situates consumers in a digital context with an endless flow of information. Previous research on social media studies focused on the visible side of social media usage, such as selfies (Gannon & Prothero, 2016). Here, we explore how consumers experience trends on social media and incorporate them into their lives, contributing to consumer identity project literature.

Social media-driven trends are prevalent in the highly competitive beauty industry ("Topic: Beauty Brands on Social Media," 2024), setting the context for our research. Social media trends within the beauty industry are fragmented. Various trends offer different, even in some cases contradicting, information and values to consumers. We use postmodern theory to understand social media trends' fragmented and dynamic nature and their impacts on consumers. The dynamic nature of the social media context makes it difficult to trace all of its effects on consumers. Therefore, we confine our research to its implications on consumers' identities. Previous research that brought together consumer identity projects and online environments sheds light on online identity construction (Costa Pinto, Reale, Segabinazzi & Vargas Rossi, 2015; Schau & Gilly, 2003). For instance, Costa Pinto and colleagues laid out the strategies gamers utilise to construct their identity within their community with the affordances of multiplayer game environments. Also, the sense of self in the digital environment (Belk, 2013) and multiple identities online (Turkle, 1995) are studied. Even though these studies shed light on identity formation and, in some cases, its communication (Schau & Gilly, 2003), the presence of contradictory information as a postmodern condition and its effect on identity construction remain underexplored. However, various SMIs combat misinformation online by producing specific content. For instance, cosmetic chemist SMI Dr. Michelle Wong (Lab Muffin Science) and other cosmetic chemists frequently discuss scientific misinformation on social media accounts (Lal, 2024). Consumers are also exposed to online "debunking" content from other authority figures, such as dermatologists. It is crucial to understand how consumers' experience of consumption-related content on social media in the presence of such multiple and conflicting information manifests itself in their identity projects. We can advance our understanding of postmodern consumer identity in the face of digital shift and whether earlier theorisations hold in such an environment. Hence, this research aims to understand the effect of the postmodern, fragmented digital world on consumers' identity projects, which are the narratives of consumers' ongoing construction of their identities (Schau, 2018).

Our article is organised as follows. We begin by reviewing the literature on the postmodern theory of self and consumer identity projects. Specifically, we are interested in the "saturated self" concept of Gergen (1991), which stands for a self-lost due to the fragmentation of the postmodern world due to the rise of digital technologies. Second, we contextualise our research by selecting a specific consumer tribe, skin care consumers, to explore their identity projects revolving around consumption-related relationships on social media. Following the interpretive research paradigm, we present our findings by interpreting 13 in-depth interviews with skin care consumers. Because consumer experiences are embedded in cultural contexts, it is crucial to analyse data concerning the dynamics of the cultural

context. Acknowledging this fact, we paid attention to the skin care context to discover the deeper meanings of consumers' experiences. The hermeneutical analysis is appropriate for uncovering hidden meanings embedded in cultural contexts, so we used hermeneutical analysis to interpret the data. Postmodern identity literature and textual data from interview transcripts informed our hermeneutical analysis and interpretation.

Theoretical background

Saturated self in a postmodern world

Postmodernism arose as a critique of modernism, which is based on the Enlightenment's focus on rational thought, and its development was significantly influenced by the rise of mass communication (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Today's digital era, which is defined by postmodernism, offers vast, diverse, and even conflicting resources that consumers manifest in their consumption practices and identity works. Postmodernism maintains transition over stability, presents hyperreality, denies macro narratives, allows for fragmentation over unity, the concurrence of vast and incompatible ideas, beliefs, and values, and emphasis on consumption rather than production (Gergen, 1991; Joy & Venkatesh, 1994; Firat, Dholakia & Venkatesh, 1995). Fragmentation manifests itself in consumers' consumption practices as diverse and unrelated consumption experiences and related identity works as multiple selves rather than a concrete, single sense of self (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

There are various contradictory views on how consumers experience the postmodern self: the enjoyment of multiple selves (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Firat & Shultz, 2001), the quest to construct a coherent self (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Murray, 2002; Ahuvia, 2005; Tian & Belk, 2005; Gould, 2010; Carrington, Neville & Canniford, 2015; Seregina & Schouten, 2017; Schau, 2018; Tse & Pezold, 2023), and the loss of self (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991). Firat and Venkatesh (1995) interpret multiple identity projects of postmodern consumers as a form of liberation where they enjoy different, incongruent, and versatile selves, in which they do not seek a coherent sense of self (Firat & Shultz, 2001). Contrary to the liberatory postmodernist perspective on self (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Firat & Shultz, 2001), the specific stream of research on identity projects suggests that consumers seek to create coherent identity narratives among multiple selves that form a unity of self through consumption practices and possessions (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Murray, 2002; Tian & Belk, 2005; Gould, 2010). Constituting a coherent self-narrative is not passive in case of multiple conflicting identities. Instead, consumers develop various coping strategies to deal with their numerous selves (Goulding, Shankar & Elliott, 2002; Ahuvia, 2005; Tian & Belk, 2005; Bahl & Milne, 2010; Seregina & Schouten, 2017). In some cases, like moral consumption situations, they even fail to cope (Carrington et al., 2015). The last stream of research holds a pessimistic view of the postmodern self, which is present in Cushman's (1990) "empty self," a loss of personal worth and an eagerness to fill this emotional gap, and Gergen's (1991) "saturated self," losing a secure self due to constant absorbing of different life goals, values, ideas of people due to rise of technologies.

Today's highly fragmented digital world is an amplified version of Gergen's (1991) portrayal of the postmodern world. Social media has become a part of the life of a digitally connected individual (Bayer, Anderson & Tokunaga, 2022) who spends an average of 143 minutes on social media daily (Statista, 2024). Within this timeframe, individuals encounter and engage with numerous online content. Social media delineates a good example of a postmodern condition where it has proliferated the number of relationships we have daily. Each relationship or encounter with content exposes different, even contradicting, information, beliefs, and values on the self. Within this digital postmodern environment where brands and social media influencers create and diffuse trends online, individuals have tremendous resources to pursue their identity projects.

As our concern in this exploratory research is to understand the effect of social media on consumers' identities, we pay particular attention to Gergen's (1991) assertion that information technologies play a significant role in the emergence of the saturated self. In a fragmented, postmodern world, Gergen (1991) argues that as individuals encounter an increasing number of relationships due to the rise of information technologies, each connection loses its depth. However, even in surface-level relationships or random encounters, individuals are exposed to others' views, values, and desires directly or by inference through their commodities (Gergen, 1991). According to Gergen (1991), these scattered relationships, each imposing its values and viewpoints on the self-concept, erode the sense of unity of self, which he calls this postmodern condition "postmodern consciousness." In this postmodern consciousness, the individual explores and is impressed by the vast opportunities and possibilities one can have through technology. Hence, this individual can realise all the possible selves through multiple self-investments. Accordingly, one's self becomes populated with others' selves, which Gergen calls

multiphrenia. In this condition, there is no unity of self; with diverse self-investments, the self becomes saturated. Gergen (1991) further asserts that one-day multiphrenia will be a norm rather than an unusual condition: "It would be a mistake to view this multiphrenic condition as a form of illness, for it is often suffused with a sense of expansiveness and adventure. Someday, there may be nothing to distinguish multiphrenia from simply "normal living." Indeed, Turkle (1995) acknowledges that this condition has already happened in the case of digital, artificial worlds, as she states, "Now, in postmodern times, multiple identities are no longer so much at the margins of things. Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands must be negotiated".

The presence of multiple identities and individuals' experiences of various selves in postmodernity has captured the interest of consumer researchers who explore consumer identity projects, as discussed above.

Postmodern consumer identity projects

Identity is not fixed but continuously shaped and transformed throughout life (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Schau, 2018). The malleability of identity is a modern condition where the market provides resources for continuous identity construction (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Slater, 2008). Consumers freely construct their identity through everyday consumption choices (Bauman, 1995; Larsen & Patterson, 2018; Schau, 2018; Paterson, 2023; Rokka, Ulver, Arnould, Thompson, Crockett & Weinberger, 2023). Schau (2018) defines *an identity project* as "the ongoing creation of narratives of self-identity relating to our perceptions of the past, present, and hoped-for future." The ongoing identity projects of consumers with market offerings are one of the leading research areas for interpretive consumer researchers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The postmodern era presents a fertile ground to explore consumer identity projects as the fragmentation of self in the postmodern area makes it possible for consumers to perform multiple identity projects (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

The postmodern condition of valuing consumption over production manifests itself in consumer identity projects. Production was seen as the sole value-creating activity; however, in postmodernism, consumption practices are considered prominent (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). The importance of consumption derives from the view that consumption is no longer a passive practice but an informed one that is culturally embedded and requires special skills such as coding and decoding meanings products convey (Belk, Bahn & Mayer, 1982; Gergen, 1991; Firat et al., 1995; Levy, 1999; Roberti, 2024). Hence, active postmodern consumers are involved in coding and decoding the symbolic meaning products, or brands convey in daily consumption practices, and consumers regard brands as cultural resources to construct their identities (Holt, 2002). However, this interpretive act is not limited to products; it is also an ongoing practice for consumers subject to forms of mass media and advertising (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Holt, 2002; Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 2003). Additionally, consumers use their interpretation as a source for their identity constructions (McCracken, 1986).

As in postmodern marketing (Firat et al., 1995), consumers as active agents are crucial tenets of consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Allen, Fournier & Miller, 2018). Arnould and Thompson (2005) assert that "CCT research has emphasised the productive aspect of consumption. Consumer culture theory explores how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals". Indeed, consumer identity projects are one area of research in which consumer culture theory explores socioculturally situated consumer behaviour along with other regions: marketplace cultures, the socio-historic patterning of consumption, and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Holt (2002) regards consumer identity projects as the central area of research in postmodern consumer cultures. A postmodern consumer adopts various identity projects (Arnould, Press, Salminen & Tillotson, 2019) revolving around consumption, not committing to a single identity but enjoying its fluidity among various fragmented relationships (Gergen, 1991; Roberti, 2024). Extensive research delves into consumer identity projects in both offline (Belk, 1988; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994; Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006) and online settings (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Belk, 2013; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2021; Bonneau, Aroles & Estagnasié, 2023).

Turkle (1995) regards computers and the internet as realisations of postmodern theory regarding fragmentation, multiple identities, cultural prominence, and shifting realities. Following her, we propose that social media embodies postmodern conditions as well. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define *social media* as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."

Individuals use social media to connect with their friends and engage with the content of brands and social media influencers; within this regard, social media has proliferated the number of relationships individuals have.

Due to social media's highly fragmented environment, consumers expose themselves to different, even contradictory, content while spending time on social media. In this exploratory research, we are interested in how consumers construct their identities in such a digital environment and incorporate trends into their lives.

Research context

Context is essential to interpretive consumer research (Arnould, Price & Moisio, 2006). In this study, context defines the available relationships and provides a resource for consumers to craft their identity projects. According to Arnould et al. (2019), the research area of consumer tribes reflects the postmodern turn in consumer culture theory. Postmodern consumer tribes are collections of people with shared passion or emotion, with rational and non-rational bonds (Cova & Cova, 2002). Values are essential to tribes (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2011). Hofstede (2001) defines values as "a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others." We regard values as culturally driven (Thompson & Troester, 2002) and recognise that each tribe has its value system.

The skincare industry has the most significant market share in the cosmetics sector ("Topic: Cosmetics Industry," 2024) and is expected to reach a 194.05 billion US dollar value by 2032 (Skincare Market Size, Share, Trends | Growth Analysis [2032], n.d.). This growing industry dates back to ancient times; Egyptians used oils in grooming and hygiene (Jain & Chaudhri, 2009). Today, the scene is much more complex in terms of its history; grooming practices are embedded in a consumer culture that problematises natural processes such as ageing and invents commercialised solutions (Coupland, 2007). This problematisation paves the way for companies to profit in various ways in this highly competitive market. Social media is essential in this consumer culture, disseminating information about skin care rituals and products. As critical actors in social media, SMIs profit from this commercialised culture and contribute to its growth ("Topic: Cosmetics Industry," 2024). SMIs form communities around their content, where consumers get information and inspiration. Following Mardon et al. (2018), we consider SMIs and skin care consumers as a tribe uniting around certain consumption practices, values, and discourses. The beauty industry is highly fragmented, with emerging trends such as sustainability, inclusion, and wellness (Kumar, 2005; Amed, Berg, Lingqvist, & Magnus, 2023) offering different values to its consumers that may serve as a resource for their identity projects. Hence, the beauty context represents fertile ground for this exploratory research to address our research question.

Method

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 passionate skin care consumers who followed at least one skin care influencer on Instagram. Before conducting the interviews, we determined several themes to discuss according to our theoretical background (Arsel, 2017). Interview questions are grouped according to themes informed by the identity work literature, specifically Gergen's saturated self-concept and the current social media context around trends and skin care consumers' relationship with cosmetics. Hence, these themes revolved around respondents' knowledge of and use of social media trends and identity-creation processes. We pre-tested the questionnaire with two consumers who regularly use skin care products and follow skin care influencers on social media. We utilised purposeful sampling and recruited the participants from Instagram with an announcement. Once we reached data saturation, we ceased the data collection. We deemed the data-saturated once recurring themes were derived from the analysis. We conducted the interviews from July to December 2023. Participants were females between 23 and 41 years old from diverse backgrounds; their profiles are listed in Table 1. Participation was voluntary in the study. Some of the participants were residing in cities other than the hometown of the interviewer; to include them in the research and to ensure the equality of the interview environment among participants, we conducted all the interviews through the online meeting platform Zoom. Interviews lasted for 60-90 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed, and coded. All participants were passionate skin care consumers who relied on the Internet and social media to get information about skin care. Our discussions revolved around respondents' skin care routines, information searches about skin care products, and thoughts about various social media trends in the beauty industry. In addition to semi-structured interviews, we read all the relevant blogs, magazines, books, and forums, attended online webinars about beauty trend forecasts, and became highly familiar with the beauty industry.

Table 1: Demographics of Respondents

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation
Ceren	F	24	Student
Seda	F	29	Chiropractor
Buse	F	38	Art and Design Teacher
Çiğdem	F	28	Materials Engineer
Cansu	F	34	Biologist
Zeynep	F	38	Face Yoga Coach
Sezgi	F	23	Student
Tuğçe	F	25	Business Administrator
Nazan	F	29	Biologist
Mina	F	41	Housewife
Ekin	F	33	Lawyer
Ada	F	32	Influencer
Duygu	F	28	Neuroscience Ph.D. Student

Source: Produced by authors

We conducted a hermeneutic analysis to derive cultural insights following the interpretive research paradigm (Thompson et al., 1994). What sets hermeneutic analysis apart from other qualitative methods is its importance to the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which consumers' experiences are embedded. Also, the meaning derived from hermeneutical analysis does not reflect the meaning that the consumers derive from their experiences, but rather, it is derived from the researcher's interpretation with respect to the relevant context (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Hence, because this research aims to understand consumers' experiences concerning their identity projects within the skin care community, we used hermeneutical analysis to interpret the semi-structured interview data. Following the requirements of the hermeneutical analysis, we began the study by acknowledging the pre-understandings we, as researchers, have. Unlike the positivist paradigm, pre-understanding is valued in the interpretive paradigm as long as researchers recognise their prejudices (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Hence, we reflect on our pre-understandings throughout the analysis. Firstly, we conducted an intratextual analysis, analysing each interview independently, focusing on themes of postmodern conditions, consumption-related relationships with SMIs and brands, values, and identity projects. After the initial readings, we returned to literature, which sometimes opened up a new perspective on interpreting the transcripts. Hence, individual transcripts were re-read after the initial readings. We took notes as memos about each transcript at this stage and tracked how our understanding evolved by re-reading the texts. In this step, we open-coded the transcripts, updating the codes as new understandings emerged after multiple readings. In the second round, we conducted an intertextual analysis to capture shared insights from the interviews by comparing the transcripts. We applied a hermeneutic circle, going back and forth between the part and the whole and interpreting and re-interpreting the data to reach a holistic understanding (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994; Dibley, Dickerson, Duffy & Vandermause, 2020). We re-read the texts while comparing transcripts and revisited the literature (Dibley et al., 2020) that provided a lens to interpret the data. New understandings emerge from the constant iteration. Also, new codes are applied in the second round, and earlier codes are revisited. Common themes were developed at this stage by deriving emic meanings from etic codes. Once the analysis is finalised and themes emerge, we interpret findings informed by data, memos, and the literature. One crucial aspect of interpretive research is its rigour; even though interpretations differ among researchers because of their different pre-understandings (Arnold & Fischer, 1994), the goal is not to have the same interpretation. Yet, it is about to come to a shared understanding that adds to the study's rigour (Dibley et al., 2020). Hence, the shared knowledge of the interpretations among the authors is achieved, and the findings are discussed in detail in the following section.

Findings

Consumers' consumption-based relationships on social media, in the prevalence of various online trends, yield identity transformation. Naive skin care consumers become savvy by acquiring the knowledge and skills to read the scientific information on product labels, such as ingredient lists, and deconstruct marketing tactics. This consumer identity transformation is the primary experience skincare consumers go through. Social media players, content creators, SMIs, and brands lead this transformation. As opposed to what Gergen (1991) posits, a highly fragmented social media environment does not yield a loss of self. Instead, consumer identities are adaptive; they evolve and change. However, this new, transformed identity is not stable; it experiences information overload and the presence of contrasting values.

Identity transformation: the narrative of smart consumer

According to consumption-based relationships via social media, skin care consumers construct evolving identities concerning their past and present. The identity project (Schau, 2018) of skin care consumers represents a transformation; the past self is transformed into an informed new self who makes informed consumption decisions. According to our participants, this progression is due to respondents' knowledge acquisition through social media. They follow SMIs creating skin care content (skinfluencers), skin care professionals like dermatologists and pharmacists, and brands on Instagram and YouTube. Through them, our respondents learn about cosmetics ingredients skincare routines, find solutions to specific skin problems, and learn more about brands. This goal-directed use of social media transformed the naive identity of our respondents into an informed one. Our discussions revealed two ways consumers construct a smart consumer identity through social media: gaining knowledge about the science behind the products, specifically the ingredients list, and learning brands' marketing techniques.

Empowerment through science information

Before using social media, respondents viewed themselves as uninformed and naive consumers. While discussing their old shopping habits before social media usage, some respondents indicated experiencing regret about their past identity due to being involved in wrong product choices and skin care practices. This is illustrated in the following part of the interview with Tuğçe.

T: You know, the brands our mothers' friends were selling at home, and our mothers were bringing these products to our house; these brands were popular then. I used a product for acne-prone skin. I didn't know the name of this skin condition, but I thought the model in the ad had skin similar to mine, so I bought that product. I was using these without any knowledge. My mom probably thought it was good for me, so I guess I harmed my skin.

This example pertains to the past identity the respondent refers to as an uninformed skin care consumer in two respects. First, she could not name her skin condition at that time. Diagnosing the skin condition is the first step in searching for related products, as the respondents mentioned several times. They learned how to analyse their skin condition to determine what the needs of their skin are. Second, she selected a brand for its ease of availability rather than reading the ingredient list to learn about the product as she does now. It is important to note her discourse, "I did harm my skin." She attributes the reason for the damage to herself rather than a momentarily poor choice that caused the damage. Hence, she interprets that her uninformed consumer identity, which could not name the skin condition and bought products according to availability in the past, was responsible for the harm. Like Tuğçe, Nazan talks about her past shopping habits as very different from now. When asked how she was buying skin care products before using social media, she responded as follows:

N: It was terrible (laughing). I remember my old choices, and we did not know anything. I am not old, but I am far from the new generation. I chose a brand because it was widely on the shelf and the most accessible one…I bought whatever was at a discount or according to what my dorm friends used then. In those days, social media was not mainstream. It was my senior year at the university when I met with the skin care content on YouTube, such as content about skincare ingredients and brand reviews…(Now) I am evaluating the ingredients according to my skin needs. I bought an eye cream; it attracted me because it has a patented ingredient. Though I did not understand what it does on the skin, the SMIs I trust recommend that product. It was on sale, so I bought it to try. I noticed my eye area needed special care because of my age.

As an uninformed consumer, Nazan shopped according to product availability and her friends' recommendations. However, her new skin care consumer identity is someone who can read the ingredients in the formula and make informed consumption decisions. Gergen (1991) stated that

individuals change due to their encounters with other individuals by "knowing that" and "knowing how". In the former, we grasp plenty of information about the details individuals present to us, such as their words, looks, and behaviours. In the latter one, we use that information to perform related behaviour. Skin care consumers learn how to diagnose their skin condition and what to do once they have skin problems, like buying products with specific ingredients targeted to their skin condition. Hence, myriad encounters with SMIs' content on Instagram and YouTube equipped consumers with skincare knowledge to become smart consumers who can diagnose their skin conditions and read the ingredients in the formula. Today, one does not need to know the complex science behind cosmetic formulations. SMIs and other social media content creators, such as dermatologists and pharmacists, produce content about how to read ingredient labels and choose the best-performing products according to the ingredients in the formula. Hence, by making science communication on social media, these creators play a crucial role in transforming consumer identity as an informed consumer.

Also, it is crucial to consider the context. The informed consumer is not alone in the market. Science becomes culturally embedded as brands complement the effect of social media in educating consumers by utilising scientific claims to promote their products, which Chen (2015) calls the "scientification of beauty." Indeed, the scientification of beauty is a trend that most brands, including niche brands, follow and create relevant content on social media. Skincare brands utilise scientification through discourses related to science, such as ingredient names, clinical trials, statistics about product laboratory testing, concentrations of ingredients in the formula, customer satisfaction survey results, expert recommendations, innovations such as patents and trademarks, product names, product designs, and integrated design of product web pages (Ringrow, 2014; Jen-Yi, 2015; Kenalemang-Palm & Eriksson, 2023). Nazan mentioned that she bought the eye cream because it has a patented ingredient. This crystallises the scientification of beauty and shows its interplay with social media, as she decided on the product because her trusted SMIs recommended it. Within the skin care tribe, the scientification of beauty is supported by online technologies as well, such as online ingredient dictionaries like INCI Decoder (https://incidecoder.com/), Paula's Choice Skin Care Ingredient Dictionary (https://www.paulaschoice.com/ingredient-dictionary) and smartphone applications like Skincare Scanner: Stilla. Further, governmental associations such as Cosmile Europe also provide consumers with information on cosmetic ingredients (https://cosmileeurope.eu/). Hence, the identity of a smart consumer is constructed through social media and further supported by the industry and governmental associations through the scientification of beauty.

Decoding marketing information

Gergen (1991) notes, "Via television, myriad figures are allowed into the home who would never otherwise trespass." With the availability of digital technologies, as illustrated above, skin care consumers can access various information and experiences from people they could not otherwise reach. The skin care tribe consisting of SMIs and skin care professionals like dermatologists and pharmacists online educated the skin care consumer about how to diagnose the condition of their skin and how to select the right products according to the ingredients. For some of our respondents, the other facet of the smart consumer identity is the respondents' decoding of brands' marketing techniques. They are no longer naive enough to be deceived by marketing claims. This decoding ability is nonetheless independent of the empowerment through scientific information. By acquiring knowledge about how to read and understand ingredients in the formula, our respondents are better equipped to detect false marketing claims on the product package.

Duygu's passage below illustrates this case very well. She came across an ad on Instagram for an online course that teaches people how to read hair care product formulations. Because she had problems with her hair, the ad attracted her attention, and she signed up for the course.

D: In the past, I ignored the product's ingredients. Generally, I trusted the labels on the package and my friends' recommendations. However, last year, I took an online course. They were advertising extensively on Instagram. An Asian girl living in Australia had very long hair (if she did not use extensions), and she would say that hairdressers and people who recommend easy solutions do not understand hair care. Her hair care needed a lifestyle adjustment. I took a 2-week course from her; I also learned beneficial things about skin care along with hair care. Some silicones protect hair and skin, and once you wash your hair or skin, you cannot quickly get rid of them, depending on what you use. Like sulfates, I learned about all these chemicals and started paying attention to the ingredient list… I see those products at Gratis, Watsons, and maybe Sephora. They write in substantial font sizes on the product label, "It does not contain paraben" and "Free of SLS," I do not like this. They have other bad things in the formula. Technically, it is true that they do not contain these ingredients. However, once you put harmful ingredients into the formula rather than those ingredients (paraben, SLS), it does more

harm in the continued use…they put more budget into marketing than research. They claim things that the product cannot do, and unfortunately, this is the norm. It does not fit with my values. I hate brands that spend considerable money on their campaigns and celebrities. They put extensions on the hair of the celebrity, and hairdressers make her hair. If I do things like that, I have done extensions, which destroy my hair. I never recommend it. A celebrity looks excellent for that specific shoot, for that campaign on that day. The brands that align with my values spend more money on research. They will indeed spend money for marketing purposes and want to earn money. This is ok, but doing it wisely (is crucial) like Hailey Biber does for her brand.

Duygu learned about the ingredients and their functions via the online course. Owing to her knowledge of the ingredients, Duygu interpreted the "free of paraben" claim as a marketing tactic. A study by Dodds, Tseëlon and Weitkamp (2008) shows that consumers with a science background can discriminate between scientific and pseudoscientific advertising claims. Indeed, pseudoscientific advertising claims are common in cosmetics advertisements because of their persuasion effect, which makes consumers believe in the product's efficacy (Dodds et al., 2008) and serves as a differentiation strategy in a highly saturated market (Ringrow, 2014). Her later decoding of the advertisement of a shampoo promoted via celebrity parallels with Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) finding of critical interpretation of media by consumers, which stands for deconstructing the intentions of brands that hide behind the ads (such as the economic motivation of brands) and criticising the unrealistic representations in ads.

Armed with scientific information through social media, some of our respondents believe that internet knowledge can substitute for professional advice. They are unsatisfied with skin care professionals in real life and are heading to social media to take care of their skin without needing some skin care professional to consult. Ekin talks about her experience with dermatologists and, later, her inclination to use social media to learn and get information.

E: In the past, I consulted several dermatologists. Even though my skin did not need treatment, they offered me acne medicine or brands they collaborated with. Dermatologists work with specific brands and prescribe them to their patients. That sounded commercial to me. They advised those products with a commercial concern, and I did not benefit from them. So, I felt that the right thing to do was to know my skin better and take care of it by establishing a skin care routine. My skin care journey has started like that. Then I learned about the acids in skin care, double cleansing, etc. I learned about them from YouTubers and from the research I did on the internet. I also followed some SMIs that I trusted. I started to know my skin better and created a skin care routine. My research is a substitute for what dermatologists do.

Ekin's inference that dermatologists have commercial concerns behind their product recommendations and that she could not solve her problem despite consulting a dermatologist led her to substitute consultancy from a dermatologist to learning skincare from the internet and social media herself. Here lies the ideology of individual responsibility to care for one's skin that is similar to Crawford's (2006) individual responsibility on health issues, in which he asserts that health is contingent on social practices and is a social and cultural construct rather than solely a biological one. Nevertheless, this individual responsibility to care for one's skin comes out of dissatisfaction with the professionals, and the internet is considered an alternative. Even though that could be illusionary, traditional authority recedes as postmodern conditions blur the boundaries between consumers and experts. The smart consumer identity, then, for some of our respondents, moves beyond creating a simple skin care routine for oneself to skip professional help to pursue self-treatment.

Identity dilemmas: information overload and contrasting values

Information overload

For some respondents, dilemmas arise with every encounter with new, conflicting information during their identity transformation. For instance, a passionate skin care consumer, Buse, tells us that skin care makes her happy beyond its utilitarian value. However, she nonetheless feels lost amid contradicting voices on social media. Her journey has been chaotic. She initially used a dermocosmetics brand. Then, she heard somewhere that people should only put something on their face that they can eat (the narrative constructed by natural skin care advocates who argued that people should not use chemicals in skin care but natural products, which is a part of the natural cosmetics trend). Hence, she started making masks at home with some fruits and vegetables. Later, she was informed by an SMI that putting food on your face, such as fruits and vegetables, is harmful because their pH level can harm the skin. Accordingly, she stopped using natural masks at home and started to shop for natural brands. She came across an account on Instagram that rates ingredients according to safety ratings, and she found out that

the natural brand she uses has so-called endocrine disruptors in its formula, which led her to stop using products of this natural brand. Now, she relies on a mobile ingredient application to read the ingredients' safety ratings while shopping because she feels lost with vast amounts of contradictory information on social media. In the context of identity, she cannot name herself as an informed consumer because she absorbs individuals' contradicting information. However, as her chaotic journey illustrates, she tries to select the best products not according to the marketing claims but according to ingredient knowledge. Therefore, she is still bound by the logic that choosing the right products depends on ingredient information. Like other respondents, she is embedded in a skin care culture that values scientific information, but she is unable to distinguish pseudoscience from science discourse:

B: I'm searching for skincare products but not from Safari. I use social media, and because of that, the algorithm shows me relevant content about skin care. I do not know whether information in such content is accurate because social media is like garbage; it is impossible to know which data is reliable and which is wrong. We need to read scientific articles to find accurate information. However, we do not know how to reach that material, which requires time and effort. I usually need a product urgently, and I cannot search for an academic article and read it within that time frame.

Ada also reflects that such ambiguity arises due to the vast amount of information that exists online while pointing out the overconsumption side of the phenomenon:

A: I wanted to pursue skin minimalism. I was like that in the past. I only had one serum and a moisturiser. But now, there are so many skin cycling routines. Now we know that information is power and things are different. We realise that, but I always feel like I am using something (skincare product) wrong and using it at the wrong time.

As illustrated above, the various and even contradicting information people share on social media confuses some individuals and causes a feeling of "doing something wrong at all times." The fragmentation of knowledge and moving away from a single truth in postmodern times (Firat et al., 1995) manifest themselves in social media and cloud the respondents' minds, preventing them from being sure of their skin care practices. Also, the points Ada raises signal the significant increase in consumption due to social media. Our participants mentioned their worries about overconsumption while discussing the values they drive from social media in the context of skincare.

Overall, the skin care tribe is embedded in a culture that constructs a scientific-sound language deriving from a pool of contradicting information, where, at times, pseudoscience is indistinguishable from science. Nevertheless, respondents discriminate between their past and present identities in various ways, as discussed above.

Contradicting values and prioritisation

This transformed identity is not stable, but the respondents navigate between different values that consumption-based relationships offer. Some respondents hold contradictory values due to several trends on social media, such as minimalism, inclusivity, and authenticity, that SMIs constantly share their opinions about. Gergen (1991) discusses social change due to postmodernism concerning a sense of self, asserting that "... Such events are manifestations of a profound pattern of social change. The change is essentially one that immerses us ever more deeply in the social world and exposes us more and more to the opinions, values, and lifestyles of others. My central thesis is that this immersion propels us toward a new self-consciousness: the postmodern. The emerging commonplaces of communication—such as those just cited—are critical to understanding the passing of both the romantic and modern views of self. What I call the technologies of social saturation are central to the contemporary erasure of individual self". We observed that our respondents were exposed to several conflicting values and lifestyles embedded in online trends and SMIs' promotion of them. Even though this caused an identity dilemma, respondents did not feel a saturated self. On the contrary, some of our respondents extracted opposite values from which SMIs were imposed on them.

Among our respondents who showed dilemmas regarding their values, an illustration of the dilemma of conflicting values happens in a locality in the case of Ceren. She mentioned that she values local niche brands because they impact the environment much less than multinational companies. Hence, she values and shops from local niche brands when she encounters them:

C: I have loved local brands since I encountered them. I do double cleansing. I started that skin care routine two years ago. I am using a brand founded by a mother and daughter living in Urla. One of them is a chemist. They are making natural skincare products. I started doing double cleansing with their products. Their products are in glass jars, which means less plastic usage. Even though they may

use excess materials to ship their products, their harm to the ecosystem differs from that of global brands.

She interprets her value for locality through the lens of sustainability. By choosing local niche brands, she is responsible for taking care of the environment (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). However, while discussing her skin care routine, she mentions that global brands have better quality than local niche brands:

C: I bought a local brand but didn't like it that much. I also purchased its squalane oil but did not put it on my face, and I used it on my hair. Global companies' products are probably better because they may have more strict R&D and manufacturing processes. So, using these products might be safer.

Apart from her moral consumption choices concerning the environment (Kenalemang-Palm & Eriksson, 2023), she puts more excellent value on her physical appearance. Regarding product performance, she indicates that she may prefer global brands over local ones. The dominant value of our respondents in their identity projects is physical appearance. They prioritise being physically better among values such as minimalism, sustainability, or locality. The contradictions in Ceren's case are resolved once they prefer products that benefit their health and physical appearance. However, the transformative power of social saturation manifests itself in conflicting values when physical appearance does not enter the equation. In this scenario, rather than observing a saturated self, we observed that one value creates an opposite value. They clash, and the latter wins. This is nicely illustrated in Zeynep's below excerpt:

Z: Isn't that much variety confusing and tiresome? I think it is. The Korean 10- or 15-step routine was once famous. I feel like I cannot reach that skin (Korean glass skin) if my routine has one missing step.

Interviewer: You felt like that?

Z: I did indeed. I think I need a routine like this when it is marketed like that. I may not benefit from my skin care because it has five steps. If it is 10, I will get the benefits. I get influenced…I gave up the Korean routine; now I only use things I really need…We need to budget for such a routine. Also, some moisturisers already contain niacinamide and peptides, so adding an extra moisturiser or tonic is unnecessary. I preferred to move on with fewer layers and only use what I needed.

The famous Korean skin care routine, a popular social media trend by skinfluencers (Flora, 2023), influenced Zeynep to buy too many products and create a long skin care routine. Once she valued a lengthy skin care routine to achieve Korean glowy skin, she decided, with her ingredient knowledge, that only some products do the same thing as too many products. Hence, her experience with a maximalist Korean skin care routine created the opposite value of minimalism.

Also, several respondents valued localism after exposure to Korean skincare products. Korean skincare products are popular with local natural ingredients, like snail mucin, black mud, and centella asiatica (Kwon, 2020; Nguyen, Masub & Jagdeo, 2020). The obsession with Korean skincare brands awakens the idea that their country can be like Korea regarding local production. Cansu mentions her ideas about locality:

C: I think Korea sets a good example. Our local brands should receive government support in terms of taxes. They can hire people the government recommends, creating job opportunities within the country. For instance, once, the mersin plant (Myrtus communis) was highly popular, and there were brands with patented ingredients. We have various endemic plants like that.

Hence, her valuing Korean skin care in terms of its powerful ingredients created an awareness of her own country's local plants that can be used for skincare ingredients. Korean skin care popularity triggered an opposite value; consumers can benefit from their own country's resources rather than another country. Other respondents also mentioned the Korean example as a triggering effect towards localism. Conflicting values appear for the authenticity trend as well. For instance, most of our respondents value the representation of natural skin with wrinkles, freckles, and acne. However, even if they value inclusivity, they want to eliminate their skin problems and have flawless skin free of acne, hyperpigmentation, and wrinkles. For instance, Ceren came across a niche local brand that named its anti-ageing cream "I Love My Wrinkles," she liked the name and mentioned:

C: I have read the reviews of that cream, and one consumer wrote that - if they wrote anti-ageing cream, I would not buy that, but because the product says "I Love My Wrinkles," it made me feel good." We need to realise this reality.

However, she also acknowledges that she values wrinkle-free skin, as most people do. As she states:

C: Finally, some people aim to avoid wrinkles when applying sunscreen. In fact, for most of us, avoiding wrinkles takes precedence over protecting against skin cancer. This might be especially true with women since I have never seen men apply sunscreen to their faces.

Nonetheless, this postmodern condition of having contrasting beliefs and values due to online trends does not cause a saturated self either. Any value respondents hold, locality, inclusion, minimalism, or authenticity, loses its significance for the value of physical appearance, which is the dominant value of the respondents. This new, transformed identity, valuing physical appearance, serves the ideal of beauty in society. In cases where the core value is not the main issue, different values awaken opposite values, as illustrated above.

Discussion

This research explored how the skin care consumer tribe engages with social media trends promoted by SMIs, content creators, and brands and how they integrate them into their identities. We used postmodern theory to understand the effect of consumers' consumption-based relationships on social media on their identity projects. Identity projects of postmodern consumers mostly revolve around the sign value (Morris, 2001), that is, consuming specific products not for their use value but for what they signify. This kind of identity project through consumption concerns brands that are visible to the public. Skin care represents a different case; it is invisible unless consumers show or talk about the brands they use. However, our study shows consumers still perform identity projects with skincare products. Trends on social media offer various information, values, and beliefs to skin care consumers that they can use as a resource to construct their identities. Within a fragmented digital world, consumers transform their identities. Their new identity is an informed skin care consumer identity, which they communicate through their behaviours, such as shopping according to the products' ingredients. One of our respondents, Zeynep, even expressed her new consumer identity to her friends through behaviours other than shopping:

Z: Thank God people are not tanning under the sun anymore. If I see a friend trying to tan, I warn them and ensure they move to a shadow.

Her behaviour is that of an informed consumer who knows the importance of skin care and is aware of possible negative factors that harm skin health. This transformation to a new smart consumer identity is a common experience that all our respondents go through via social media. One facet of this smart consumer identity is consumers' acquired ability to read and understand the formula's ingredients. Consumers seeking specific ingredients in skincare and shopping according to ingredients rather than marketing claims is an ongoing trend in the industry (Villena, 2024). Brands also use scientific language in their marketing communication to attract the attention of these consumers. Jen-Yi (2015) documented this trend, brands' use of scientific discourse in their marketing communication activities, by analysing skincare print advertisements and named it the "scientification" of beauty. "Scientification" of beauty (Jen-Yi, 2015) would not be a valid marketing technique if it would not resonate with consumers. Our analysis shed light on how consumers become active seekers of scientific knowledge while shopping for skincare products. Our research showed that consumers' consumption-based relationships on social media enable naive consumers to construct a smart consumer identity that values "scientification" of beauty (Jen-Yi, 2015). Further, the ability to understand the formulation and its ingredients is closely tied to the ability to decode marketing techniques that aim to deceive consumers by using scientific language. Several respondents who critically analysed marketing claims associated with ingredient information mentioned this second facet of smart consumer identity, decoding marketing techniques. In addition, some of our respondents sometimes used their new identity to bypass professional help and solve their problems independently. Then, the identity project of the skin care consumer tribe reflects an informed and reflexive consumer that uses consumption-based relationships on social media as a resource to construct its identity. This new smart consumer identity is constructed via SMIs and brands, paralleling Belk's (2013) assertion that the self is co-constructed via other persons online and that the shared self is realised, yielding an aggregate extended self. In other words, not only individual consumers but the skin care consumer tribe constructs a coherent, smart consumer identity shared among the tribe members. Not only does the tribe shape the consumers' identity, but consumers also contribute to the formation of smart consumer identity. It could be argued that as our respondents follow SMIs and become smart consumers, their interest in skin care content teaching skincare ingredients creates demand for such content. In turn, smart consumer identity formation is fostered and valued among the tribe. However, adding to Belk's (2013) aggregate extended self, identity formation is not a linear process for all of our respondents, but identity dilemmas arise around contrasting values. Also, being informed consumers and searching for scientific information is embedded in the identity projects of postmodern consumers and documented in the current literature about identity projects of

consumers (AbiGhannam & Atkinson, 2016). AbiGhannam and Atkinson (2016) show that environmentally conscious mothers are responsible for conducting extensive research to learn about the chemicals baby products contain before purchasing. Hence, our study contributes to the current literature about identity projects of postmodern consumers, acknowledging their reliance on scientific information. It sheds light on how consumers transform their identity from naive to smart consumers in a fragmented digital world.

According to Gergen (1991), the formation of a saturated self is caused by the proliferation of information technologies. As information technology, our respondents use social media to get information about skincare products. The presence of various SMIs, content creators, and brands on the platform contributes to the information load experienced by some of our respondents. Since contradictory information emanates from these accounts, it yields consumer identity dilemmas. However, even though social media represents a postmodern condition concerning fragmentation (Turkle, 1995), our respondents do not signal the presence of a saturated self (Gergen, 1991) amid various, even contradicting voices on social media. Instead, the primary experience of the skin care consumer tribe revolves around a transformative self where our respondents gained scientific knowledge and the ability to deconstruct marketing techniques.

Two critical factors revealed in our research prevent the population of self (Gergen, 1991), hence the saturated self. First is the respondents' ability to prioritise their values. We identified that the skin care consumer tribe aims to achieve a beauty ideal: flawless, healthy, and young skin. This beauty ideal is represented in consumers' dominant value: the importance of flawless physical appearance. As the skin care tribe highly values physical appearance, smart consumer identity directly serves this value. Gergen (1991) posits that individuals absorb views and values from others so that a secure sense of self is lost. However, this passive view of an individual contradicts the postmodern view of consumer agency (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Holt, 2002; Hall et al., 2003). Contrary to Gergen's passive view of the individual who absorbs the values of other individuals, our research shows that consumers do not automatically accept the opinions and values of others. In line with prior research about consumer agency that views consumers as an active agent rather than a passive agent (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Holt, 2002; Hall et al., 2003), our respondents are committed to the value of physical appearance and tend to abandon other values such as minimalism and sustainability, to pursue the beauty ideal. Hence, our respondents do not experience a saturated self because they can prioritise their values. In our case, other values offered by different trends, such as minimalism and localism, lose their significance concerning physical appearance value. If Gergen's proposition were valid in this tribe, we would observe a saturated self who wants to simultaneously pursue minimalism, localism, authenticity, and flawless physical appearance. However, our respondents tend to shy away from higher-order values such as minimalism, sustainability, localism, and authenticity if they go against achieving flawless beauty ideals and pragmatically prioritise the physical appearance value. Suppose higher-order values do not contradict reaching a beauty ideal. In that case, consumers may extract opposite values after exposure to the trends that offer these values, such as the Korean skincare trend awakening minimalism or localism values. Hence, prioritising the value of physical appearance prevents our respondents from automatically absorbing others' values, beliefs, and views, avoiding the loss of self.

The second factor that prevents the saturated self is (Gergen, 1991) consumers silencing the multiplicity of voices on social media by only following specific chosen influencers. Rather than catching up with different potentials, this goal-driven behaviour enables them to realise the potential of becoming informed consumers in this competitive marketplace. Our respondents mentioned that they try to find SMIs they can trust and are willing to follow those SMIs only. They are not passive consumers; instead, they actively select which elements to incorporate into their lives (Giddens, 2023) in the presence of the multiplicity of voices on social media.

Hence, although social media represents a fragmented, postmodern environment that enables numerous relationships, the saturated self is not realised in consumption-related relationships on social media within the skin care consumer tribe; instead, we observe a transformative self. Even though digital technologies prevailed in the early 1990s, when Gergen (1991) introduced the concept of the saturated self, social media was not born until the late 1990s. Our research sheds light on the validity of the "saturated concept" in a specific consumer tribe and lays out the factors that prevent its formation.

Overall, we documented the identity projects of skin care consumer tribes who get informed via social media trends and transform their identity in this postmodern digital world. In line with Turkle's (1995) assertion that postmodern consumers mix and match different roles that make up their identity, skin care consumers experiment with other trends. Turkle calls the internet a "social laboratory" where users experiment with different virtual selves. We demonstrated skin care consumers do the same

experimentation with values they extract from trends. Hence, whereas Turkle refers to virtual worlds of video games, a very similar experimentation is happening within the real life of consumers. For instance, while enjoying and learning from the maximalist Korean skincare trend for a while, consumers may abandon this trend and pursue minimalism, which offers the opposite value of the Korean skincare trend. Further, our research reveals that skin care consumers are pragmatic in that they may choose to ignore higher-order values, such as caring for animal rights, in case these values contradict their goal of achieving a beauty ideal. For instance, even though Mina mentions that she cares about animal rights and gives importance to cruelty-free brands, she still prioritises the value of physical appearance over her higher-order value of caring for animals;

M: Indeed, I try to prefer cruelty-free brands, but many brands test their products on animals. So sometimes I decide according to benefits and harms. I look for a natural or cruelty-free alternative, but if I cannot find a product that satisfies my needs (the needs of her skin) and is cruelty-free, I may choose a product that works for me even if tested on animals.

Trends are increasing consumers' awareness by providing information. Nonetheless, consumers must decide which values they will incorporate into their identity projects. Hence, by documenting the consumer agency in this research rather than observing a loss of self (Gergen, 1991), we support Turkle's (1995) assertion that consumers mix and match different values in their identity projects. Experimenting with different values could be interpreted as a bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), where consumers select different facets of trends according to their purposes and play with them (Marion & Nairn, 2011). This act paves the way to a transformative self; naive consumers turn into smart consumers yet still perform identity works with different values they extract from social media trends.

An essential aspect of our findings is that some respondents have lost trust in experts and institutions. They consider the internet, in our case, social media, a valuable resource that can equip them with enough knowledge to solve their problems independently. Hence, the newly constructed smart consumer identity enables consumers to take responsibility for caring for their skin and solve their skin issues by bypassing professional help. Dissatisfaction, frustration with experts, and loss of trust make consumers see consumption-based relationships on social media as a viable way of increasing literacy to solve their problems independently. Hence, by being smart consumers, they want to trust their self-made expertise. Ekin's statement about her frustration with a dermatologist nicely illustrates this phenomenon:

E: I told myself, "Ekin, you need to do this (solve her skin problem) on your own. That is how my skincare journey began.

So, regarding social media content as a viable alternative to expert advice stems from consumers' dissatisfaction and frustration with experts.

Our research contributes to the consumer digital culture context theme identified in Stephen's (2015) analysis of consumer behaviour in digital environments. Also, we contribute to consumer identity projects literature by documenting consumers' identity projects, which are transformative self, uninformed consumer identity transforming into a smart consumer identity. Anker (2020) proposes to marketers a concept of consumer autonomy that would enable consumers to make thoughtful choices according to the nature of information available to consumers. He also emphasises the epistemic responsibility of consumers to make choices free of marketers' manipulation by engaging with brands enough time to acquire knowledge about the consumption context (Anker, 2020). Even though Anker focuses on marketers and, in turn, brands, we expand the concept of consumer autonomy to include SMIs as we empirically demonstrated that skin care consumers acquire intensive knowledge about brands through SMIs that transform their consumer identities. Brands can contribute to consumer autonomy by collaborating with SMIs to disseminate product information that is "relevant, proportionate, sufficient and understandable to the average, targeted consumer [...]" (Anker, 2020).

We confined our research to the skin care context, but future research may study consumers' relationships with SMIs in other contexts and explore different manifestations of postmodernism. For instance, online trends may differ in other categories, such as consumer packaged goods or fashion. Further, consumer researchers may not confine themselves to studying specific trends; they may assess the identity projects of consumers who heavily use social media and consume content tailored by the algorithm regardless of trends. We also explored the effects of postmodernism on identity projects from the consumers' perspective. Accordingly, future research may consider analysing the issue from SMIs' or brands' perspectives. For instance, whilst dominating trends, SMIs' identity projects may be explored; trends like brands may act as resources for identity construction (Holt, 2002). Also, trust is the main issue that unfolds during our interviews. Our respondents only follow SMIs that they trust to acquire

information. However, as Buse's case illustrates, finding trusted SMIs is not easy; instead, it is a challenge. Current literature on influencer marketing has explored the factors influencing followers' trust in SMIs (Kim & Kim, 2021). However, it is unclear how trust plays a role in the identity constructions of consumers. Therefore, how trust will evolve and play a role in the identity projects of consumers constitutes another fruitful research area.

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