

MONKI SEE, MONKI DO

An analysis of brand- and consumer identity co-construction on visual social media

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ABSTRACT

Consumer culture theory has long acknowledged the role of goods in shaping identities and selves. In fact, some would argue that consumption is the main space in which identities are constructed, and that the pursuit of identity is the main goal of consumers. As consumption choices come to represent symbolic meanings, brands have become both tools for self-expression and multidimensional sources of value. As a result, consumers bond with brands as an extension of the self, allowing them to produce a coherent self-narrative through their consumption choices. Additionally, empowered by the collaborative nature of Web 2.0, consumers find themselves increasingly more involved in the construction of brand meaning. It is here where a dynamic process of brand and consumer identity co-construction emerges, in which brand meaning to be re-performed and re-interpreted by a multitude of stakeholders who perform their own identity needs and understandings.

This thesis aims to observe these phenomena, by examining the process of brand- and consumer identity co-construction on visual social media in a real-life context. Guided by the following research question: *How are brand- and consumer identities co-constructed on visual social media?*, this research takes a closer look at the cultivation and negotiation of brand meaning between a fashion brand and its consumers. In order to answer the research question, in-depth interviews and netnographic observations were employed in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand. Ultimately, the research process led to a grounded theory consisting of three emerging themes, all representing the experiences and performances by internal and external stakeholders and how these come together to co-construct the brand's meaning. First, it was found that in creating a sense of *sisterhood and solidarity*, the brand has been able to take on the role of the "other" with whom they can identify and form a close interpersonal relationship with. This relationship is achieved through various strategic elements, such as matching values and lifestyles between the brand and consumer and catering to needs that other stores have failed to. Additionally, it was found that by tapping into the *creativity of the collective*, the brand has been able to tap into the consumer's need for self-expression using the affordances of the visual social medium. Customers are invited to share their 'style stories', which enables a sense of contribution and recognition, while creating valuable content for the brand. Lastly by *embodying the digital brandscape*, the results of this research demonstrate that while market-based choice and new media technologies certainly enable new opportunities for identity construction, these come hand in hand with new challenges and burdens, for brands and consumers alike.

KEYWORDS: *consumer identity, brands, co-construction, fashion, social media*

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1. Introduction

Contemporary consumer culture increasingly suggests that the self is expressed, if not defined, by our choice of brands. We now live in a world where our phones and laptops say something about what kind of person we are, and the clothing brands we choose determine how others will judge us. Over time, products have become ingrained with cultural meanings that go beyond their primary function. As a result, consumption has become a meaning-based practice and the brands we choose (or don't) have become symbolic tools we can use to express parts of ourselves. It is here where consumers become identity-seekers, and consumption represents the main space within which personal and collective identities are continuously shaped and negotiated (Belk, 1988, as cited by Riley, Singh & Blankson, 2016)

The construction and maintenance of a consistent sense of self is considered an ongoing process, and throughout their quest to express parts of themselves to the outside world, consumers will choose brands that they can personally identify with (Breakwell, 1986; as cited by Jantzen, Østergaard & Vieira, 2006). That is, the brand's identity must align at least in part with their personal identity (De Chernatony, 1999). In this thesis, brands, and thus their meaning are the result of an assemblage of different actors, representing 'complex social relations that develop among a multitude of enacted identities' (Lury, 2004; Von Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2017). As consumption choices come to represent symbolic meanings, brands have become multidimensional sources of value; encapsulating feelings, lifestyles, personalities, culture and other characteristics that help consumers establish a deep and personal connection with them. Consequently, people bond with products and brands as a part of the self, allowing consumers to produce a coherent self-narrative through purchasing their products. These interactions illustrate a co-creation process in which the brand's identity is appropriated as consumers enact their own. Scholars argue that such a process involves brands and consumers coming together to 'collaborate and participate in value creation' (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). However, any discussion surrounding the creation of value should arguably question who is benefitting from it the most.

As consumers continuously interact with marketplace resources, this can be seen as a symbolic project of sorts, in which his or her identity is realized through the continuous making of consumption choices. At first, this may sound emancipatory; but the question becomes, how much agency do consumers really have? Brands are constantly seeking new ways to connect their product to individuality and personalization. However, the choices provided to consumers are still within a given market structure and are still being shaped and directed down particular avenues (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). This provides an interesting tension taking place, highlighting how marketplace discourses can simultaneously be "enabling and constraining, both facilitating consumers' abilities to play with identity while also circumscribing them, entertaining consumers while inculcating

them” (Thompson & Tian, 2008; as cited by Larsen & Patterson, 2018, p. 199). Thus, while consumers may feel a sense of agency and emancipation as they construct their identities, they are still constrained in that their choices are decided by structural power of the market.

Additionally, as of the most expressive product categories, fashion allows for us to represent our bodies in meaningful ways to both ourselves and others. In expressing parts of ourselves through the clothing we choose. As a vital site through which the self is performed, the body has become a fundamental part of identity construction (Ghigi & Sassatelli, 2018). The identity positions available to us, including tastes and expectations, are continuously produced and reproduced by various actors. This creates a dynamic field of social relations in which personal identity is constantly subject to ambivalence and negotiation (Ghigi & Sassatelli, 2018). Again, highlighting the multi-layered, dynamic process of stakeholder and brand identity co-construction, this thesis aims to explore this phenomenon in a real-life context.

Guided by the following research question: *How are brand- and consumer identities co-constructed on visual social media?*, this research examines the relationship between a brand and its consumers in light of consumer’s identity projects, by exploring the cultivation and negotiation of brand meaning. Because fashion has come to represent a space of gender negotiation, female consumers will be the focus of this research to explore potential sociocultural constraints they experience in pursuit of their identity projects. There is simply more tension to be explored within this segmentation of consumers, which will later be discussed using academic literature.

At the center of this study, is Monki, a Swedish fashion brand aimed solely towards women. Their first store was launched back in 2006 in the Swedish city of Gothenburg, where they are still based today. Joining the H&M group two years later – the brand now operates in 19 online markets as well as 127 stores in 16 markets, spread across Europe and Asia. According to the H&M website, Monki is a storytelling brand that is “all about being brave, friendly and fun while empowering young women to stand up for themselves – and others” (<https://about.hm.com/en/brands/monki.html>). Aside from this, the brand’s website gives more in-depth information about their brand values, dividing them up into three categories: *Monki Cares*, portraying their sustainability efforts; *Monki Thinks*, representing various mental health campaigns, and *Monki Loves*, referring to their love for ‘fashion, music, illustrations, style, sisterhood’ (<https://www.monki.com/we-are-monki/>). These three categories are communicated in the form of a blog on their website, containing various forms of content such as campaigns, stories, projects and tips that the customer can look into. These three categories already provide an indication of some of the network of relations that come together to form the brand’s assemblage. They are also important for this research, because it is how the brand attempts to resonate and steer their consumers’ identity projects. As we will see later on in this thesis, brands implement identity myths

and ideological opportunities in their branding communications with the hopes of stimulating engagement and differentiation.

Monki was also chosen because of their activity on social media. It was found that the brand is present on multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Spotify and Snapchat. While all of these mediums are used to connect with current and potential customers in different ways, it was found that their Instagram contained the most content and interaction with their customers. On this platform, Monki has created their own hashtag called #monkistyle, which customers can use to show off their 'style stories' and 'individual Monki vibe' (https://www.monki.com/en_eur/monkistyle.html). Customers can then post a photo wearing their Monki clothes, tag the brand or use the hashtag, for a chance to be featured on their Instagram page or website. Monki does this by either reposting the customer's photo to their Instagram, or by adding it to an interactive online gallery on their website. Customers can then look through this feed of user generated content, and shop through those photos if they like the way another customer has styled a particular item. This two-way process of brand value co-creation is precisely why I am choosing Monki and their customers as the main focus of this research. In order to explore the complex phenomena involved in this study, two sub-questions have been formulated:

- Sub-question 1: How is brand meaning co-constructed in the production of consumers identities?
- Sub-question 2: What role does visual social media play in the process of brand- and consumer identity co-construction?

The first sub-question is related to how these female consumers perceive brands as a part of their identity projects. This was more brand-specific regarding the brand I am researching, in order to see how it is perceived in the minds of their consumers and how this perception contributes to their identity projects. This also involved broader information to gain insight on their general relationships with brands, and how they may or may not be a part of their identity work. The second sub-question has been formulated in order to get a clear understanding of the role social media plays in this dynamic, multi-layered process taking place between brands and consumers. In conjunction with conducting interviews with customers, a netnographic analysis was performed in order to better understand the online culture being observed (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2014). Netnographic observations helped reveal more about the brand's identity, how the brand attempts to connect with their female consumers, as well as if and how they attempt to steer their identity projects. As part of my netnographic analysis, I was able to speak to a brand representative of Monki who was able to contextualize my observations. All in all, based off the data generated by

my interviews and netnographic analysis, a comprehensive understanding was formed based on the experiences and performances by internal and external stakeholders to see how they come together to co-construct the brand's meaning. For this research, it is crucial to explore both roles in order to better understand the dynamic of this relationship and its implications.

The order of this thesis will begin with a theoretical framework, consisting of relevant theories and concepts from previous literature. This framework will form the theoretical basis of my research which I will use as a guide throughout my analysis. The next chapter contains my methodology section, in which I explain and justify the chosen research method, as well as the process behind my data collection and analysis. The fourth chapter will contain an in-depth discussion of my findings, which will be linked back to the theories presented in my theoretical framework. In the final concluding chapter, the results of my research shall be summarized, along with a reflection on its limitations as well as suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Identity as being and becoming

The development of one's personal identity is a rich and complex process; yet many of us feel we intuitively understand it. Research on identity has a long history, cluttered with different perspectives that go beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the concept of personal identity remains important to give some context in relation to my research. Salzer-Mörling & Schroeder (2006) argue that in our contemporary context, identity is no longer seen as something one is ascribed, nor as a fixed entity that one can adopt. This was especially the case in previous centuries where factors such as family lineage, gender and social class defined one's place within society. At this time, one's identity was clearly defined from birth and remained stable and solid (Kellner, 1992; as cited by Larsen and Patterson, 2018). Larsen and Patterson note that while this perspective may seem archaic to us now, there are still many places in the world today where ascribed identities are still prevalent (2018). In Western culture, however, social boundaries are increasingly being challenged; becoming more fluid. The forces of modernity have shifted identity to something one has, to something one does: a process of being and becoming (Jenkins, 2014). As a result, identity and identity seeking have become interchangeable in that the self has become a continuous process of identification that one unravels over time (Jenkins, 2014). It can thus be seen as a story or project of the self (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; as cited by Larsen & Patterson, 2018), reflexive and continuous as 'the narrative is always being revised' (Giddens, 1991; Larsen & Patterson, 2018, p 198).

As a consistent conception of the self, identity can be characterized by four points: continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Breakwell, 1986; as cited by Jantzen, Østergaard & Vieira, 2006). Continuity gives a sense of sameness to the self over time, despite changes that may have occurred. Distinctiveness gives the self a sense of uniqueness, especially in relation to others. Self-efficacy gives the self a sense of agency in various interactions and contexts. Lastly, self-esteem, gives the self a sense of value and worth. The construction of identity, then, underlines that the construction, maintenance and enhancement of a consistent sense of self is an ongoing process (Breakwell, 1986; as cited by Jantzen, Østergaard & Vieira, 2006). Similar to the concept of identity, is that of self-concept. Self-concept may be defined as "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Sirgy, 1982; Wylie, 1961; as cited by Jamal & Goode, 2001). Other scholars define the self-concept as encompassing an array of "role identities, personal attributes, relationships, fantasies, possessions and other symbols that individuals use for the purpose of self-creation and self-understanding (Schouten, 1991, p. 413; as cited by Jamal & Goode, 2001). Traditionally, notions of the self were based on the assumption

that a person had a stable set of personality traits, leading to consistent behavior despite different contexts. However, this assumption was challenged by later scholars who suggest that individuals should be seen as having multiple selves. This means that people may act differently in different situations, and certain personality traits may come up more than others depending on the context or social situation. This led to the conceptualization of self-concept to the following four “selves”: *the actual self*, referring to how an individual sees himself/herself; *the ideal self*, or how an individual would like to see himself/herself; *the social self*, referring to how an individual feels others see himself/herself; and the *ideal social self*, or how an individual would like others to see him/herself (Jamal & Goode, 2001).

This thesis adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective, which asserts that the self is intersubjective and is constructed through social interactions. One’s relation to reality is argued to be mediated by ‘the symbolic environment’, and as such, people assume the role of the “other” in order to better understand their sense of self. This demonstrates how the construction and experience of identity can take place on two levels: a social level and an intra-psychological level (Jantzen et al., 2006). The social character of identity construction refers to the fact that the self cannot be realized without interaction with others (Belk, 1988). In relation to this, Jenkins defines identity as “the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities” (p. 2014). While personal identity is about feeling comfortable with whom one is (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; as cited by Jantzen et al., 2006), it’s construction is also social, “requiring self-monitoring skills and contributing to self-esteem, self-efficacy, distinctiveness and continuity of a ‘me’ – e.g. by competences in regard to the staging of a performance in everyday life” (Goffman, 1959; as cited by Jantzen et al., 2006). In a quest to define one’s identity, people both assert their individuality, while also seeking validation and acceptance in order to belong to society. It encompasses our understanding of who we are, who others are, and in turn; other people’s understandings of themselves and others (including us) (Jenkins, 2014).

In relation to this thesis, one of the most common symbolic interactions we engage in is consumption. Literature has shown that people consume products for both their functional value as well as their expressive value. It is not just about what a product can do, but what it means (Jamal & Goode, 2001). Over time, consumption has grown to be a vehicle for self-expression; purchasing and using products or brands allow consumers to define, maintain and enhance their self-concept. This demonstrates how products and brands serve as symbols for understanding ourselves, others and the world around us (Larson & Patterson, 2018).

In his publication, *Possessions and the Extended Self* (1988), Russel Belk’s primary argument throughout his work is that the objects in our possession can extend and strengthen one’s sense of self, both literally and symbolically. In a literal sense, the possession of a tool or weapon, can allow

us to do something that we would otherwise be incapable of doing. Symbolically, however, objects like a uniform or trophy can also allow us to feel as if we would be different without them, towards both ourselves and to others. Throughout his work, Belk distinguishes between consumers possessing a core self and an extended self. The core self encompasses the “body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences”, which is then expanded by “persons, places, and things to which one feels attached” which become part of the extended self (Belk, 1988; as cited by Ahuvia, 2005). Naturally, some possessions are more central to the self than others, and items that one does not feel attached to are not part of the self. He states that the possessions should be visualized as layers around the core self, and these layers will differ across individuals, time and cultures who have formed shared symbolic meanings to various goods (Belk, 1988). Thus, as consumers come to assemble their sense of self, there are a variety of marketplace resources to draw upon. As Belk puts it, “only a complete ensemble of consumption objects may be able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self” (Belk, 1988, p. 140). While the ideas put forward in this publication turned Russell Belk into one of the most esteemed figures in the world of consumer research, he returned to his work years later to discuss some of its limitations. In 2002, he explained how he recognized that his metaphor of the extended self is a Western and masculine one; but if he were to do it differently, then he would have considered more alternative postmodern perspectives. He states himself that his work lacks a “feminist, queer-theory and multicultural perspective” on the self and possessions (Belk, 2002; as cited by Ladik, Carrillat & Tadjewski, 2015). This research aims to partially fill that gap, by incorporating the voices and perspectives that Belk lacked; focusing on young, international female consumers. The next section will continue this discussion, by expanding more on the relationship between identity and consumption.

2.2 Consumers as Identity Seekers

As we saw in the previous section, a primary characteristic of developing one’s identity is done through investing the self through objects (Belk, 1988). Research on consumer culture has long acknowledged the role of goods in shaping identities and selves (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1998); as well as the sociological and symbolic significance of consumption (Levy, 1959). Due to the diffusion of social categories, the rise of mass markets and an ever-growing abundance of market offerings – contemporary consumption has come to represent more than just fulfilling basic needs. It now permeates social relations, identities, perceptions and images; allowing us to express cultural meaning, create and maintain lifestyles and construct notions of self (McCracken, 1990; Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Thus, the consumption of multiple products or brands come to form a symbolic representation of consumers themselves, enabling them to produce and reproduce social

structures, relations and values (Kravets, Maclaren, Miles & Venkatesh, 2018). Some argue that consumption is the main space in which identities are constructed and performed (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Larsen & Patterson, 2018), and that the pursuit of identity is their main aspiration (Thompson, 2014). This constant process of self-making through the use of marketplace offerings, is central to what scholars call *the consumer identity project* (Larsen & Patterson, 2018), which has grown to be the most prevalent perspectives in consumer culture research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Through various forms of identity work, the purpose of this project is to produce a coherent self-narrative through marketplace resources (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). In relation to this, Giddens (1991) states:

The project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life... the consumption of ever novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of the self. (p. 198)

Giddens' work shows how consumption has come to represent a meaning-based practice, and the goods we choose represent symbolic tools used to express who we are. Entrenched in social practice, identity work is again seen as a reflexive, symbolic, ongoing process (Larsen & Patterson, 2018); which can be seen as a kind of performance in which consumers can enact personalized versions of cultural scripts (Muray, 2002; as cited by Ahuvia, 2005). It is through social practices like interaction and validation that consumer identity projects are realized. For instance, research on commercial collectives, such as brand communities, demonstrate how consumer identity projects are socially, historically and culturally embedded (Larsen & Patterson, 2018; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

As stated by Von Wallpach et al. "customer engagement with a brand is merely a form of citation of brand identity for the purpose of performing self-identity" (2017, p. 1). In other words, in their pursuit for identity, consumers (and other stakeholders) appropriate the brand's identity while enacting their own. Because brands have become vehicles for self-expression, consumers tend to create powerful relations with brands because of their ability to enhance and express one's identity (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). In pursuit for identity, consumers have needs for self-consistency and self-esteem. In line with symbolic interactionism, brands take on the role of the "other" with whom the consumer identifies, perceiving the brand as a part of their self-concept (Jantzen et al., 2006). In order for brands to play such a role in the consumer's life, a sufficient level of consumer-brand identification must be established. Consumer-brand identification can be defined as the perception of sameness between the brand and the consumer; also called self-image congruence (Agerup, 2011). As explained in the previous section, consumers tend to choose brands that help move them closer to realizing their values and ideal selves (Belk, 1998). That is

why the most powerful factors influencing consumer-brand identification are often the intangible characteristics of a brand, such as brand values. Self-congruity theorists have defined this as value congruity, which describes the mental comparison that consumers make in regard to the similarities (or dissimilarities) of a brand's values and their own set of values (Aagerup, 2011). What this theory suggests, is that consumers are more likely to be drawn to a brand when it matches their own sense of self, because it enables them to express themselves more fully and authentically. The stronger a consumer identifies with a brand, the stronger he or she tends to commit to the brand and develop positive attitudes toward it (Jamal & Goode, 2001).

At the heart of the consumer identity project, lies the notion of choice. Consumer demand, a main driver for economic growth, is both encouraged and maintained by the market through discourses surrounding individualization and choice. Choice enables consumers to 'become' – creating an arena in which freedom, autonomy and fulfillment can be pursued. Because consumers now have more choice than ever before about who they want to be, some scholars have brought attention to the challenges they face as they strive to create and maintain a coherent self-narrative (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). Navigating personal preferences, making the right choices and representing the self in the right way have become both an overwhelming concern and a driving force of consumption. However, a critique emerges here about how much choice consumers really have. There is an apparent tension between the emancipatory nature of the consumer identity project and the structural power of the market in shaping and steering consumer choices. Taken to the extreme, some scholars argue that choice is an illusion, identity projects are market-mediated and consumers are 'fed a mass-marketed, pre-packaged, commodified form of difference' (Halnon, 2005; as cited by Larsen & Patterson, 2018, p. 202). However, a key counter-argument is that brands cannot exist without being enacted; they can only become brands because consumers use them in their practices (Lury, 2004). While these practices can be designed and steered by companies, consumers do have productive and unanticipated ways of using brands. The meaning ascribed by consumers can never be fully dictated, nor are meanings and actions forced onto them (Arvidsson, 2005; Lury, 2004). In studying identity projects, researchers must be mindful of the extent to which consumers steer the course of their identity projects, and how much they may be constrained by marketplace discourses (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). Relating this to my research, fashion has been argued to be one of the most expressive product categories in existence (Aagerup, 2011). These ideas will be developed further in the following section.

2.3 Fashion in a post-feminist world

A vital site in the construction of one's identity is the body. In contemporary consumer culture, the body has become an ever-adaptable 'responsibility of the self' (Ghigi & Sassatelli, 2018). According

to many scholars, the body has become a project of its own; a site through which the self is performed, to be achieved through the pursuit of one's identity (Shilling, 2013; as cited by Ghigi & Sassatelli, 2018). Bodies are not just objects for cultural meaning, but projects that are constantly becoming, made and remade (Wood, 2017). Accordingly, a variety of reflexive self-stylizing processes used for identity construction have become the norm for our capitalist consumer society.

Fashion, and more specifically clothing, is one way in which we construct reflexive body projects to perform culturally accepted self-presentations (Ghigi & Sassatelli, 2018). Fashion can be seen as "the point where the material product in the form of clothes meets the immaterial aspect of what looks good at a given point in time" (Brenninkmeyer, 1962, p. 6; as cited by Aagerup, 2011). Expressed through clothes, a physical garment becomes fashion once it has been enriched by symbolic and immaterial values. According to Kawamura (2018) a central notion to fashion is its elusive nature. Fashion allows us to modify the surface of our bodies to present ourselves in meaningful ways, while satisfying two opposing functions: social identification and distinction. As a 'visible carrier of the self', it allows the surface of our bodies to appear meaningful to both others and to ourselves. This perceived contrast towards others is what defines consumer identity in the world of fashion; identity positions, rules and tastes are produced and reproduced by collectively by various stakeholders (Ghigi & Sassatelli, 2018).

However, the positions and expectations that are produced and reproduced by different actors can translate to other parts of our identities, too. By stressing different forms of femininity and masculinity, fashion has become a terrain for the negotiation of gender. More specifically, the ideals of the female body, to be achieved through adjustment or enhancement, are continuously displayed across advertisements, fashion magazines, catalogs, etc. These bodies become normalized and adapted to adhere to legitimized standards (Karimova, Rassilbay & Sauers, 2017). Female bodies 'become' through a constant negotiation of the relationship between the body and femininity – an experience that has been described as constrained and alienating, as much as liberating and fun (Karimova et al., 2017). This tension is at the heart of the post-feminist movement, which sees women being invited by media discourses to present themselves as empowered through consumption practices and rituals (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). In post-feminist discourse, "the maintenance of the feminine body is steeped in the rhetoric of choice as an endless series of supposedly positive and empowering, autonomous consumer decisions for women and girls" (Blue, 2013, p. 6). This has resulted in a popular corporate strategy, called feminist consumerism, where companies market products to women by implementing feminist notions of empowerment. In her work, Riordan (2001) argues that in popularizing the word "empowerment" there are serious implications involved than we may think:

While I do believe that individual empowerment in women can help foster collective agency, it more often has the effect of stunting women, encouraging them to work only for themselves in the immediate moment. This of course is far from women working collectively as individuals toward significant structural changes that will help improve the lives of others. Without a doubt, it is necessary for women to feel some sort of power, but as this article suggests, when it is commodified, empowerment can come at the expense of actual change. (p. 295)

Despite these serious implications, certain brands still incorporate feminist standpoints and values in their brand stories. Post-feminist rhetoric often involves celebrating individuality, freedom and girl power (Dobson, 2015). It thus remains important to criticize the authenticity of such brand stories. How can a brand support women while simultaneously encouraging the maintenance of the female body? The ideas presented by the post-feminist movement are valuable for this research, in order to maintain a critical edge. Especially since such rhetoric may become more harmful to female consumers as brands become more and more entangled in our daily lives, as we will see in the following section.

2.4 Brands and Social Media

As noted above, brands can be seen as tools through which identity, social relations and shared experiences can be constructed. It is precisely this social, multi-dimensionality that makes it impossible to reduce the concept of brands into one single definition. More broadly, this thesis adopts the view that brands, and thus their meaning, are the result of an assemblage “of imaging, techniques and technologies, and makes use of different kinds of relationships for different strategic purposes” (Lury, 2009). In other words, a brand represents a network of different relationships, roles and practices involved in the branding process. Similarly, a sociocultural branding perspective argues that brand meaning is no longer in the company’s hands but is co-created within the market. In this thesis, co-creation is viewed as a two-way process through which brands and consumers collaborate to create value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Brands, then, can be seen as representing a “continually evolving constellation of meanings, constructed through a dialectical process among a multitude of stakeholders in relation to their individual and collective identities” (Essamri, McKechnie & Winklhofer, 2019, p.1). It is here where brands are recognized as the complex entities and socio-cultural phenomena that they are, highlighting the multi-dimensionality of brands and how the various roles, practices and relationships involved in the branding process contribute to its meaning. Within the various components of this assemblage, the brand is performatively constructed; containing various interrelated meanings and manifestations,

created by both internal and external stakeholders (Asmussen, Harridge-March, Occhiocupo and Faraqhar, 2013; Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Lury, 2009;). Many scholars argue that, as a result of these developments, a branded landscape has emerged in which brand-related meanings are increasingly entangled in our everyday lives. The idea of such a 'brandscape' represents the material and symbolic environment that is generated by consumers in their interaction with marketplace resources. In their study, Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård (2007) explain this further, by stating:

The brandscape is thus not merely a landscape filled with logotypes and images, but rather a culture where consumption and commodities are given meaning and where brands are crafted and circulated. It is a landscape where norms and values are produced and consumed and in line with Thompson and Arsel (2004), we view the brandscape as a field of relationships where consumers' experiences are ideologically infused. (p. 413)

According to these authors, this term represents the social, economic and cultural landscape in which brands are produced and consumed. In this space, both producers and consumers increasingly focus on the expressive value of the brand, leading to a discourse often laden with moral statements and contradictions (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007).

Additionally, some scholars argue that co-creation possibilities are higher in contexts where information and communication technologies are present (Pires, Stanton & Rita, 2006; as cited by Verwey, 2015). Due to the integration of social media in our lives, the way that people, communities and organizations communicate has forever changed. Many scholars argue that this is due to the internet transforming from a structure mainly based on information dissemination, to one more focused on two-way communication, user-generated content, community building and data sharing (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; O'Reilly, 2005), enabled by the emergence of Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 was coined in 2005 by Tim O'Reilly, who provided the following definition:

Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an "architecture of participation", and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences. (n.p.)

At the time, O'Reilly spoke of Web 2.0 as a new platform with new applications, characterized by radical decentralization, radical trust, participation instead of publishing, users as contributors and

collective intelligence (O'Reilly, 2005; as cited by Fuchs, 2014). Later on, Kaplan and Haenlein defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (2010, p. 61). These authors continue to say that if Web 2.0 represents the ideological and technical foundation, then user generated content (UGC) represents all of the ways that people make use of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In using these applications, people are able to create, share and exchange information by facilitating various kinds of virtual connections. Today, the benefits of participating in social media go beyond social communication, and now play a role in building reputations, career opportunities and revenue (Ngai, Tao & Moon, 2014). Individuals can not only connect with friends and family, but also with entities such as brands (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In establishing such virtual connections, users are now able to receive instantaneous streams of information from those connected entities, allowing them to freely associate - or disassociate - with any entity they wish. For example, consumers can now easily follow or like their favorite brands on various social media platforms. This has fostered a sense of community, linking "like-minded individuals and enabling niche groupings of online communities with shared affinities to which consumers can easily belong" (Verwey, 2015). Besides connecting brands with their consumers, these platforms also make room for the cultivation of peer-to-peer relationships and for brand information to be exchanged (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

While social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube all exemplify the above affordances of Web 2.0, this research will focus solely on Instagram. Instagram is a social media application that allows users to share moments from their daily lives in the form of a photo or video. Users have the ability to enhance or manipulate their content with several different editing tools, such as filters or cropping (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). Conceptualized by Carah and Shaul (2016) as an image machine, this visual social media platform "enables market relations to form through everyday life and cultural space around the production and circulation of images" (p. 3). On the app, users are able to edit and post content to their personal profiles, view other users' content and interact with them in the form of likes, comments or direct messages. Carah and Shaul (2016) also identifies pausing on particular images, tapping on hashtags and visiting other profiles as engagement, too. Likes and comments also make images appear on other people's networks, in addition to the home page, creating constant flows of content. Additionally, users can also search, follow and navigate through that content in a number of ways. The application provides a search bar where users can search for the following: 'accounts' (i.e. other Instagram users), 'tags' (i.e. hashtags) and 'places' (i.e. location tags). The hashtag search is of particular interest to this research, as it enabled me to recruit my interviewees. A hashtag can be described as a string of characters preceded by the hash (#) character. According to Small (2011),

hashtags can represent topical markers, indicating the context or core idea expressed in a particular post. As such, hashtags are the adopted by other users who can use it to share similar or related content. Besides their official Instagram account, Monki has created the hashtag #monkistyle to invite customers to share photos of them wearing their clothing. Because I am looking into how the meaning of Monki is co-constructed by its female consumers on visual social media, the hashtag search feature enabled me to access a constant stream of customers who contribute to the brand's meaning. Due to the dynamic networks of social media platforms like Instagram and the ease of sharing content, consumers have become integral authors of brand stories (Gensler, Völckner, Liu, Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). The next section is dedicated to explaining this further, as well as the consequences it has had on brand management.

2.5 Rethinking open source branding

Traditionally, brand management was a one-way process; initiated and performed by managers while other stakeholders observed (Aaker, 1996). However, due to the emergence of new media technologies, organizations have found themselves having increasingly less control over the information available about them, while consumers find themselves with a greater voice than ever before (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This has resulted in the empowerment of the consumer, as they shifted from a passive role to a more active co-creator of brand meaning. This phenomenon has been described as the democratization of brand management, and has been conceptualized by Asmussen et al. as: "a phenomenon that occurs when the ability to use the internet leads to a more democratic form of power sharing between an organization and its stakeholders regarding the creation of and access provision to brand manifestations" (2013, p. 1475). Provided with unlimited opportunities for participation, Fournier and Avery (2011) argue that consumers now have an equal (if not greater) influence in shaping brand narratives than managers themselves. These scholars use the metaphor of open-source branding to describe when a brand is embedded in an online cultural conversation, whereby consumers are regarded as creators and disseminators of branded content. With these changes in the brand landscape, managers are arguably losing control over their brands as consumers become authors of brand stories. However, there are still strategies brands can use in order to use the participatory, social and collaborative nature of these platforms to their advantage (Verwey, 2015).

As consumers become more and more involved in brand narrative, they have become increasingly difficult to reach. The Web 2.0 marketplace has enabled consumer-to-consumer interaction and easy user-generation of content such as brand reviews, recommendations, social networking sites, blogs, etc. These consumer-generated brand stories told through social media arguably have more impact than traditional marketing strategies. Providing users with

transparency, referrals and connections - their impact is greater because they are digital, visible, instant and dynamic (Gensler et al. 2013). Despite a loss of control of brand meaning, Holt (2004) argues that the role of managers within the assemblage of brands is still a vital one. Arvidsson (2005) states that brand management is not about imposing or steering the direction of consumer identity projects. Rather, is it about proposing branded goods as tools through which consumers can create their own meanings. Consumers do not particularly seek out the brand and its material goods, but what they can become using those goods. The pursuit is something intangible – a feeling, relationship, experience – which can be achieved by adding personal dimensions to the brand. The goal then, as brand managers, is to “enable and empower the freedom of consumers so that it is likely to evolve in particular directions” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 244; Lury, 2004). This idea shifts the focus from brand meaning to the ways in which brands are used and how their meanings are realized through the practice itself. Brands become platforms for consumption practices; fluid, ever-changing entities that are continuously being defined and redefined through consumer choices (Lury, 2004).

Even in the Web 2.0 marketplace, brands are not left powerless in the face of their ever-empowered consumers. Rather, they are faced with the challenge of leveraging the interconnectedness of the Web 2.0 marketplace to their advantage (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Brands must find a way to imbed consumer-generated brand stories into their communication strategy to enable compelling brand stories. In revisiting the ideas proposed by these scholars, Verwey (2015) conducted a more contemporary analysis of the current digital brandscape and outlined a number of ways that brands can survive in the open-source context, by tapping into the consumer’s desire for self-expression. Brands can, for instance, enable opportunities for collaborative self-expression around the brand. Furthermore, brands can create connections between consumers by encouraging the formation of communities and allowing them the space to organically self-organize around the brand. Additionally, by facilitating the co-creation of a brand story, co-creation possibilities emerge where the essence of the brand can remain, while still creating space for consumers to symbolically express and shape their identities in relation to the brand (Verwey, 2015). It is precisely against this backdrop, that this research explores the co-construction of brand meaning within the participatory open-source context. In this context, we will see brand meaning as a constant negotiation between the brand and consumer. The web-based power struggles resulting from this process has had considerable effects on the actors involved and will be further discussed in the next chapters.

3. Method

Based on the theory discussed in the previous chapter, along with the research questions, this chapter shall present the methodological approaches that were carried out in this study. This research was conducted using both interviews and netnographic observations to gather the data, and will be explained in detail below along with justifications as to why these approaches were chosen. Besides the data collection methods, a description of my data analysis procedure will be provided in order to demonstrate how I worked towards my interpretations.

3.1 Methodological approach

The present study adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective in that it is concerned with people's behavior, beliefs and how they make sense of their world (Zeegers & Barron, 2015). This theoretical lens allows the researcher to understand the meanings people give to their environment, constructing notions of the self as they interpret significant symbols based in language, gestures and objects. Additionally, applying such a perspective will provide opportunities to analyze how various socializing experiences have impacted participants' lives. This is based on the argument that one does not simply react to stimuli, but uses symbols to constructively determine actions and meanings, and thus developing values and beliefs (Zeegers & Barron, 2015). In order to best understand this, qualitative research methods were implemented as they help "discover meaning that people award to their social worlds and to understand the meaning of their social behavior" (Boeije, 2010, p. 12), and thus will enable me to explore how brand meaning is constructed and negotiated among various stakeholder positions. Additionally, the methods guiding such research are considered flexible, enabling the researcher to establish close contact with the research field and those within it. As a result, these methods generate both rich and descriptive data that are to be construed through identifying emerging themes and categories. The end result contains findings that can then contribute to theoretical knowledge and practical implementation (Boeije, 2010).

Another key characteristic of qualitative research is its emerging nature. In using an inductive approach to my research, the direction of my analysis slowly developed and emerged throughout the research process. According to Boeije (2010), this feature of qualitative research creates space for improvisation, creativity and flexibility. This adaptability was particularly useful during the earlier stages of my research process, as I came across themes and categories that were unanticipated. Initially, the main focus of this research was slightly narrower, guided by the research question: *How is the meaning of a brand co-constructed by its (female) consumers in relation to their identity projects?* As this type of research applies micro perspective, by focusing on the experiences of individual consumers, the most commonly used method is said to be in-depth

interviews (Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006). However, the more immersed I became in my data, the more I realized that a broader analysis of Monki's brand assemblage was necessary fully grasp how the process of identity co-construction occurs between the brand and its consumers. Additionally, I discovered that social media played a bigger role than expected in the construction of participants' identity projects as well as the co-construction of the brand's meaning. Boeije (2010), states that this is a common obstacle that researchers face, due to the flexible and reflexive nature of qualitative research. If the researcher fails to adjust the research to incorporate such unanticipated themes, there is a risk of yielding fewer interesting results. Thus, I made the decision to adjust my research questions to better reflect the themes that emerged from my data, changing the research question to: *How are brand- and consumer identities co-constructed on visual social media?* That way, my research was redirected by putting more emphasis on the two-way process of brand- and consumer identity co-construction. The scope of my research became broader in order to gain a better understanding of the brand's assemblage and how the roles, behaviors and attitudes of various actors have an impact on consumers' identity projects (Lury, 2004). In order to learn more about the brand's role in this process, it was decided to conduct netnographic-like observations of the Monki website in order to gain more insight on the brand's intentions and strategies. These online observations enabled me to critically analyze the ways in which the brand attempts to insert itself into consumers' identity work. Part of this netnographic analysis also involved an interview with a Monki brand representative, who helped me contextualize and confirm my initial observations. Additionally, by incorporating a focus on visual social media into my research question, I was able to examine how online technologies play a role in the construction of both the brand's and consumers' identities. Eventually, upon gathering my data, a level of saturation was reached in which no new data could be yielded from the conducted coding process. This resulted in an innovative analysis of the phenomenon at hand based on interview data, netnographic observations and previous literature. Three key themes emerged to answer the research question and sub-questions, each representing different practices and implications of brand and consumer identity co-construction.

3.1.2 Sampling

The interview sample consists of ten people, all of which are female, aged between 19 and 31 years. All participants are Monki customers and were found using the #monkistyle hashtag, and thus produced consumer-generated content for the brand. The Instagram app allows users to search specific hashtags and follow them, which is how I reached out to potential interviewees for my research. At the moment, there are around 118K Instagram posts that contain the #monkistyle hashtag, and users from all around the world add to it every day. The hashtag page essentially

provided me with a constant stream of Monki customers who I then contacted through direct message, asking if they would be willing to take part in my study. The following sampling criteria were applied when contacting various users:

- The user’s profile must be publicly available on Instagram. This avoids any ethical conflict by ensuring a legitimate right to use and or analyze a post for research purposes.
- The user is female.
- The user posted at least one photo to their Instagram profile using the hashtag #monkistyle. This is an important criterion as it indicates adequate knowledge of the brand and its strategies. Additionally, it also suggests that Monki is used as a tool to express the self.
- The user seems to speak a sufficient level of English. This was necessary in order to make sure that I could have a meaningful, in-depth discussion with my participants.

An overview of my participants is provided below, containing pseudonyms and personal details.

Table 3.1.2 Overview of participants

Name	Age	Country of Origin	Occupation
Rebecca	19	Netherlands	Bachelor’s Student
Clara	19	Belgium	Bachelor’s Student
Melissa	31	Netherlands	IT software designer / Fashion blogger
Nicole	21	Malaysia	Bachelor student
Jacqueline	22	Germany	Medical student
Ashley	27	Ireland	Marine biologist / Fashion blogger
Hailey	26	England	Radiographer / “Midsize style” blogger
Lena	27	Belgium	Caretaker for disabled
Naomi	25	Netherlands	Instagram influencer
Amber	26	Netherlands	Head cashier at a clothing store

The research sample, represented in Table 3.1.2, was selected using a purposeful sampling technique. In a purposive sample, units are carefully selected on the basis of ‘symbolic

representation', meaning they possess a quality that is expected to be significant to the study (Boeije, 2010; Mason, 2002; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). Additionally, the researcher can design a purposive sample to be as diverse as possible. A more diverse sample means more opportunity to explore different elements that may contribute or impact the phenomenon being studied. Examples include specific sociodemographic characteristics, experiences, behaviors, and so on (Ritchie, et al., 2013). When designing my sample, I wanted to ensure that I collected a diverse group of women who experience different sociocultural constraints, perceived limitations and stages of life. That is why my sample reflects women of all colors, origins, body types and ages. The age range of my participants is 19-31, thus representing the target audience of Monki while still containing a wide variety of what is considered a "young" woman. Due to the location feature on Instagram, I was also able to easily tell where each user was from. This was especially useful for finding participants in the Netherlands who I could meet up with in person. I tried to include as many nationalities as possible in order to gain a rich variety of perspectives from all around the world. Additionally, some participants were selected based on their social media presence. For instance, it was assumed that customers who use the hashtag #monkistyle possess an observable level of self-expressive tendencies and needs, as well as a close enough relationship with fashion and the brand Monki. Some of my participants also run fashion blogs or Instagram accounts, which lead to the assumption that users who engage in fashion blogging and consumer-generated branded content indicate some level of expressive consumption and social media usage.

3.1.3 In-depth Interviews

The primary research method for the present study was semi-structured, in-depth interviewing. According to Fournier (1998) and McCracken (1990) in-depth interviews are the most commonly used method for research in the context of consumer identity projects (Fournier, 1998; McCracken, 1990). According to Miller and Glassner (1997) interviews can:

...provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds. While the interview is itself a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained. (p. 100)

Thus, in the context of this research, this method allowed for rich and detailed information about how and in what ways brands become meaningful to consumers in their lives. Regarding their execution, Legard, Keegan, & Ward (2003) identify four key features of in-depth interviews. The first is combining structure with flexibility. In terms of structure, my interviews were based on a topic guide that helped me sketch out the necessary themes, topics and issues to be covered

throughout the interview. However, this stayed fluid and flexible to allow for the development of unexpected themes and so that the topics could be covered in an order most appropriate for each participant. The second feature of in-depth interviews is their interactive nature. Often described as “conversation with purpose” (Webb & Webb, 1932, p. 130), the data is facilitated through meaningful interaction between the researcher and interviewee(s) (Legard et al., 2003; Mason, 2002). Thirdly, throughout this interaction, various techniques such as probes are used by the researcher in order to facilitate deeper, more meaningful responses. Throughout my interviews, I noticed that initial responses to certain questions were rather restrained. In order to encourage deeper responses, probes such as “Can you tell me more about that?” or “When you said [...], what did you mean exactly?”, generally helped me get more detailed and meaningful answers to my questions. It was also observed that this often occurred naturally as the interview progressed, due to the establishment of rapport. Rapport is vital when conducting interviews, because building trust with participants may make them feel more comfortable to share personal information (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). This was especially important when discussing sensitive topics such as mental health, body image issues, overcoming insecurities and more.

In addition, reflexivity has been an important part of my research process with regards to my relations with my participants. As a researcher, active reflexivity involves ‘critical self-scrutiny’ of one’s own role in the research process to avoid potential bias (Legard, et al., 2003). This is based on the notion that researchers cannot be entirely objective or detached from the interpretations of their data. Rather than aiming for this, the researcher should acknowledge their role throughout the research process and continuously critically examine it. There are varying perspectives on how involved the researcher is in the results of his or her data. While Kvale (2002) describes reflexivity as “the asymmetrical power relations of the research interviewer and the interviewed subject” (p. 9), feminist research is steered towards a non-hierarchical approach by opting for a more collaborative, intimate relationship between the researcher and participants. Reciprocity is emphasized, as well as the value of women interviewing women (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981 as cited by Legard, et al., 2003). Feminist scholars argue that a closer relationship can be fostered as the researcher is open to sharing personal accounts and experiences with the researcher (Mason, 2002). Others have criticized these arguments by stating that cultural affinity can blind the researcher and thus influence the results of the study (Legard, et al., 2003). For this research, my position as both a researcher and a woman were continuously kept in mind, in order to remain reflexive and critical of my assumptions. Throughout my interviews, I found that I had various experiences, limitations and sociocultural constraints in common with my participants as they shared personal stories with me. However, in maintaining the role of in-depth interviews, I strived to understand those experiences, rather than predict or control them. Thus, maintaining reflexivity

on my own position, I made use of valuable fieldwork skills such as active listening, having empathy, and tactical probes in order to facilitate meaningful discussions on those topics (Legard, et al., 2003). While I acknowledge my role in the research process, and potential bias it may cause, I believe that the combination of shared experiences between my participants and I, while still maintaining reflexivity as much as possible, allowed me to see patterns and themes in my data that would perhaps otherwise not be as valuable.

3.1.4 Netnographic observations

As indicated in the previous chapter, this thesis adopts the view that brands are multicultural entities, and their meaning is “dialectically constructed through iterative processes between various actors” (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2002; as cited by Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006, p. 83). As previously indicated, Monki customers were initially the focus of this research, representing one group of actors who possess co-creative roles in the construction of the brand’s meaning. However, throughout the research process it became clear that focusing solely on consumer experiences was not enough to accurately depict the two-way process of brand- and consumer identity co-construction. An analysis of Monki, as a separate actor, was deemed necessary in order to treat the brand as a “a multicultural entity whose peculiarities need to be examined from different perspectives” (Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006, p. 86). Thus, it was decided that netnographic observations could be employed to analyze how brand owners and representatives establish their own culture within the brand’s assemblage, and how it is dialectically constructed in light of their consumers’ identity projects.

Netnography is both a qualitative research methodology and a marketing research technique. Combining the terms “internet” and “ethnography”, this research method applies inductive ethnographic techniques to online social spaces (Kozinets, 2010). In recent years, such spaces are increasingly recognized as rich cultural worlds that can help reveal discursive and interaction styles, online rituals and practices, as well as innovative forms of collaboration and creativity (Kozinets et al., 2014). Some examples of key netnographic field sites include blogs, chat rooms, wikis, social networking sites and audiovisual sites (Kozinets, 2010). These resources all represent cultural sites through which the researcher can easily access information on “cultural members, values and structures” (Kozinets et al., 2014, p. 263).

In terms of execution, there are a range of methods for exploring culture through online data. Belk states that netnographies can vary along a spectrum, in that the researcher can both be fully immersed into the field or simply remain observational. Kozinets et al (2014) identify three types of data that can be collected through netnographic techniques: archival data, elicited data and field note data. For this research, archival data was initially gathered to form a “cultural

baseline” through which I could learn more about Monki’s cultural context. This type of data is fairly straightforward, entailing any content (visual or textual) that the researcher can collect online. When conducting my netnographic observations, I collected archival data through Monki’s “We Are Monki” page. On this page, the brand communicates its culture in three ways: Monki Thinks, Monki Cares and Monki Loves. Each aspect has its own page containing various blog posts, stories and campaigns as part of their branding strategy. When looking through these pages and their posts, screenshots were taken of various visual and textual units that exemplified the symbolic value of the brand. Additionally, screenshots were made of the #monkistyle hashtag page on Instagram and the integrated online gallery featured on the Monki website. Again, these were selected purposively using symbolic representation in that they possessed relevant content related to the context of the study. Additionally, these authors stress that netnography go site specific, by focusing on a small amount of posts in order to “gain a deep cultural sense of ‘what is going on’ in that particular social space” (Kozinets et al., 2014). Once the “cultural baseline” was established, my analysis could broaden and deepen by gathering elicited data. This kind of data within netnographic research refers to content that is co-created through interaction between the researcher and those involved in the online space (Kozinets et al., 2014). For this research, this was done by conducting an online interview with Elsa, a Monki brand representative. My conversation with her helped me confirm the interpretations I made from the brand’s website and also deepened my understanding of the brands culture. It was found that many of the brand’s values that are communicated on the website are also internally transmitted throughout the organization through various rituals and practices.

3.2 Data collection

The data collection period spanned across four weeks between April and May. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked about their relationship with Monki, as well as topics like fashion, personal style and social media habits. In discussing these various topics with them, I was able to gain insight on the role that these various actors have in consumer’s lives and how they contribute to their identity work. Additionally, one brand representative was interviewed along with a netnographic analysis of the brand’s website in order to gain more insight into the cultural space in question.

The average length of my interviews was around 50 minutes. Six of them were conducted in person, and five through Skype or Facetime. However, the disadvantages of a virtual interview must be acknowledged, such as the potential for less observable body language or the establishment of rapport. However, this did not seem to be a big problem as all virtual interviews were conducted

Through high quality video so that important non-verbal cues could still be observed. Additionally, these online communication platforms allowed me to come into contact with women from all over the world, offering wider variety of perspectives. During my interviews, I made use of a topic guide as an instrument of analysis to ensure all necessary topics were discussed with my participants (See Appendix A). Many of my interview questions reflected the ideas and concepts presented in my theoretical framework. This was done by carefully operationalizing the core concepts of this study into non-technical questions. An example of this process can be seen below.

Table 3.2 Operationalization of important concepts

Concept/Subject	Operationalization (Exemplary Interview Questions)
Self-expressive consumption	How does the brand help you express yourself? What does fashion mean to you?
Identity as project	Would you say that you have always dressed a certain way, or has your style changed at all?
Sense of self	How would you describe your personal style?
Value-congruity	What values or qualities come to mind when you think about Monki?
Structure vs. Agency	Do you feel like there are limitations as to how you can express yourself? What influences your fashion choices? Where do you get inspired?
Consumer-brand identification	How would you describe your relationship with the brand? Why does the brand appeal to you?

As the Table 3.2 indicates, these questions were formulated in order to frame theoretical concepts and ideas into conversational language. This made various concepts more observable as I discussed them with my interviewees. Additionally, memos were taken throughout each interview in order to more accurately depict the nature and context of each conversation. The more participants I interviewed, the more the memos helped me to draw connections and themes between other sample members and previous literature. In terms of possible ethical implications of this method, I made sure to follow the principles of informed consent with my participants. This included informing participants about the nature of the study, reminding them that their participation is voluntary, discussing how they wish to be identified in the paper and signing an informed consent form before starting the interview. Upon receiving consent, all interviews were audio recorded and

transcribed verbatim using Temi, an advanced speech recognition software (<https://www.temi.com/>). After the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were uploaded onto Atlas.ti, a computer program used for qualitative data analysis.

As for my netnographic analysis, the combination of both archival and elicited data that was gathered enabled me to gain a deeper cultural sense of the brand and the social space it operates in. In total, around 15 screenshots were made of the brand's website and my conversation with Elsa lasted for around one hour. In the next chapter, these forms of data are discussed in conjunction with the analysis of my interviews, whereby I integrate the results obtained in order to map out emerging practices of brand- and consumer identity co-construction.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of my data involved a constant comparative approach based on grounded theory. This enabled me to grasp the interviewee's experiences on their own as well as in conjunction with my netnographic observations. Grounded theory is an established methodology with roots in symbolic interactionism (Goulding, 2002). It provides a systematic, yet flexible framework for collecting and analyzing data; leading to the inductive development of a theory 'grounded' in data by identifying emerging themes and patterns (Charmaz, 2006). This analytical approach was chosen over others, because it enabled me to direct and manage my data in such a way to form a more original, innovative analysis. Charmaz (2006) also argues that grounded theory encourages creativity and self-development, as it reveals surprising outcomes, sharpens analytical skills and inspires new ideas. This is largely due to its constant comparison approach, in which multiple readings of the data help unravel (often unexpected) emerging themes and patterns are throughout the research process (Boeije, 2010).

Generally, a grounded theory approach aims to generate a new understanding of social phenomena through careful, observational techniques. This is commonly performed through a three-step coding process presented by Glaser and Strauss (2007, as cited by Boeije, 2010). In qualitative research, coding involves 'breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data' (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, as cited by Boeije, 2010). This was conducted using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis and research software. This program allowed me to analyze my data more efficiently and systematically; automating tasks that are often time-consuming when done manually. The three stages of coding are considered stages of research development and are described as: open, axial and selective coding.

3.3.1 Open coding

As the first step in the coding process, open coding takes place at the beginning of data analysis. This is performed by segmenting the data into distinct units of meaning. This was carried out using a full transcription of each interview, analyzing the text line-by-line and noting any key words, phrases or statements. Segments of data were coded by attaching short-hand descriptions and labels that depicted its meaning. Additionally, in-vivo codes were used “as symbolic markers of participants speech and meanings” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). These consisted of important vocabulary and phrases used by participants themselves, which helped accurately represent their experiences. Initially, the line-by-line coding process generated 723 open codes. After this stage, I revisited the codes I made and merged repetitive codes, as well as eliminated any that were insignificant or unnecessary. After reorganizing and prioritizing my initial list of codes, 616 codes remained. According to Charmaz, open coding generates “the bones for analysis”, and theoretical integration along with category building “assembles these bones into a working skeleton” (2006, p. 45). That is where the next steps come in.

3.3.2 Axial coding

Axial coding was the second step in my analytical process, in which the data was brought back together by making connections between observed categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The purpose of this stage is to pinpoint the best and least representable codes within the dataset, by reorganizing them in order to add “coherence to the emerging analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). This was done by clustering open codes into similar categories. Once these categories were made, they were given a name based on the similarities of the open codes it consisted of (Glaser & Strauss, 2007; as cited by Boeije, 2010). As a result, ten sub-categories were formed to represent these similarities, bringing me to the final stage of the coding process: selective coding.

3.3.3 Selective coding

Selective coding involves strengthening and developing the connections between the axial categories in order to assemble overarching themes and patterns in the data (Boeije, 2010). These themes have been presented as theoretical concepts that frame the findings of my research. The development of my selective codes was influenced by various aspects of my research. The research question was my primary frame of reference, in order to ensure my findings were leading towards a comprehensive answer. Additionally, the theories and concepts presented in my theoretical framework were also considered, in order to maintain theoretical sensitivity. However, due to the inductive nature of grounded theory, the patterns and themes that naturally emerged from my

data shaped my analytical process the most. The end result is a grounded theory containing abstract themes that fully embody the behaviors, experiences and stories captured by my observations: *sisterhood and solidarity*, *creativity of the collective* and *embodying the digital brandscape*. A coding tree representing a short overview of my entire coding process can be found in Appendix B. These findings will be thoroughly discussed in the next section, drawing connections to relevant literature and ultimately answering the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

In exploring the cultivation and negotiation of brand meaning between Monki and its consumers, the results of this study highlight different ways that brand meaning can be co-constructed in the production of consumer's identities, as well as the role visual social media plays in this two-way process. First, the findings show that in creating a sense of *sisterhood and solidarity*, the brand has been able to take on the role of the "other" with whom they can identify and form a close interpersonal relationship with. This relationship is achieved through various factors, such as matching values and lifestyles between the brand and consumer and catering to needs that other stores have failed to. Additionally, it was found that by tapping into the *creativity of the collective*, the brand has been able to tap into the consumer's need for self-expression using the affordances of the visual social medium. Customers are invited to share their 'style stories', which enables a sense of contribution and recognition, while creating valuable content for the brand. Lastly, the third theme to emerge from my data has been called *embodying the digital brandscape*. This theme highlights how market-based choice and new media technologies simultaneously enable new opportunities for identity construction, but also bring along new challenges and burdens for both brands and consumers. As consumers become more informed and skeptical of branded content, it is becoming increasingly hard for brands to get their attention. This is due to the effects of the open source environment, showing how brand management has changed and what brands can do in order to survive in the Web 2.0 marketplace.

The following chapter contains a discussion of the themes that emerged from my analysis. Each subsection represented the selective code that was created to represent overarching themes present in my dataset. As each selective code is described, I will explain the axial codes that form it in order to illustrate my outcomes. As I discuss my outcomes, relevant connections to previous literature will be made in order to discuss the theoretical implications of what was observed.

4.1 Sisterhood and Solidarity

Sisterhood and Solidarity proved to be the first theme to emerge from my data. This name of this theme represents the different ways the brand has been able to connect with their consumer's personal identity and was present in both my interviews and netnographic observations. In line with symbolic interactionism, the theme demonstrates how consumers seek to verify a series of identities in interaction with Monki (and other brands). As we will see in all three sub-categories, whether this verification occurs or not, can lead to consumers experiencing positive or negative emotions (Burke & Stets, 2009). The following subsections represent the various axial codes that the theme *sisterhood and solidarity* is made up of. The first category is called strong brand ties,

which represents how Monki has taken on the role of the “other” to form a close interpersonal relationship with whom customers can personally identify (Jantzen et al., 2006). The second category, called ‘combatting alienation from other brands’, shows how Monki has eliminated feelings of alienation caused by other brands with their inclusive size range. Lastly, the category ‘matching values and lifestyles’ will be explained in order to discuss the perception of sameness between Monki and their consumers, as well as potential identity myths and ideological opportunities that the brand is using to achieve this. Each axial code will be explained in depth, using example open codes, illustrative interview quotes and connections to theory to demonstrate my findings.

4.1.1 Strong Brand Ties

The first way that a sense of sisterhood and solidarity was exemplified is through the ‘strong brand ties’ experienced by many of my participants. This category demonstrates how Monki has come to take on the role of the “other”, forming a close interpersonal relationship with whom their consumers can identify (Jantzen et al., 2006). In order to understand this relationship, it is important to understand how Monki positions itself online. From my netnographic observations of the H&M website, it was found that Monki is described as a storytelling brand. “Aiming to be kind to the world and the people in it”, the brand claims to be “all about being brave, friendly and fun while empowering young women to stand up for themselves – and others” (<https://about.hm.com/en/brands/monki.html>). This positioning statement is important for this research, because it demonstrates how the brand attempts to resonate with and steer their consumers’ identity projects. This was further confirmed in my interview with Elsa, a 23-year-old Monki employee based in Belgium. As a manager, she explained to me the values imbedded in the “Monki DNA”: “friendly, empowering, brave and fun”, which mirrors the positioning statement on the H&M website. She also shared that these values are deeply embedded in Monki’s work culture and how she is expected to transmit them within the team she manages. Thus, whether it is to internal or external stakeholders; Monki is arguably striving to humanize their brand using various moral values and examples of post-feminist rhetoric, as we will see later on. The key message embedded in this positioning statement and the “Monki DNA” is the sense of solidarity they are trying to convey to other women (including those within the organization). Additionally, the brand’s website provides more detailed information regarding their brand values, categorized as: *Monki Cares*, *Monki Thinks* and *Monki Loves*, which will be discussed in-depth below. It can be argued that describing and presenting the brand’s values in such a way, with humanistic words such as ‘loves’, ‘cares’ and ‘thinks’, makes the brand come across as more compassionate and relatable.

When discussing their relationship with Monki, participants Nicole (22), Lena (27) and Ashley (27) said that they “love” the brand because of the uniqueness of their clothes. This is shown in the following quote by Nicole:

They have a more eccentric twist to their clothes, which really calls out to me. So that's what really compels me to buy more compared to other brands. Like 90% of my wardrobe is Monki right now. So yeah, I love them.

Here, Nicole states that she is more drawn to Monki than other brands because of the “eccentric twist” of their clothing. She also described the brand as a “safe space” for her and shops there so frequently that she has “memorized the catalog”. Similarly, Lena expressed on multiple occasions how Monki is “very important to me” and that “if it would stop now, I would cry”. She explained to me how her strong relationship with Monki is partly due to her living with borderline personality disorder. She turns to fashion as a form of therapy, and the colorful and unique clothes she can find at Monki give her “hope and joy” because they help her express her feelings to the outside world. As brands come to represent vehicles for self-expression, consumers tend to form strong ties with brands that enable them to enhance or express their identity (Agerup, 2011). Besides the clothes, Lena also indicated that she liked to visit Monki stores to interact with employees, and frequently interacts with Monki scouts through Instagram. This demonstrates a close relationship between internal and external stakeholders within the brand’s assemblage, which is shaping the brand’s meaning (Lury, 2004). Ashley (27) also shared that Monki is her “most shopped at brand” and described her relationship with the brand as “probably is quite one sided, but it's good on my part”. She “loves” Monki so much because it is “a brand that really fits me and suits me, it makes me realize I don't have to be a certain size to wear their clothes”. In becoming part of her self-concept, the brand helps her feel more self-confident. Such strong brand ties highlight the level of consumer-brand identification that has been established as the brand plays quite a big role in these consumer’s lives. When asked why the brand appeals to them, many participants answered by sharing what parts of themselves they saw reflected within the brand. This suggests that self-image congruence, or the perception of sameness between Monki and these consumers, plays a big role in establishing these ‘strong brand ties’ (Agerup, 2011). Many of the comparisons participants made between themselves and Monki involved topics such as inclusivity and diversity, which were often valued greatly due to alienating experiences caused by other brands.

4.2.2 Combatting Alienation from Other Brands

As participants explained their relationship with Monki, their positive feelings towards the brand often came hand in hand with negative experiences with other brands. Melissa (31) describes herself as a “curvy outfit blogger”, running her own blog as well as an Instagram account with over four thousand followers. The aim of her (micro)blogging activities is to show and inspire other plus-size women by showing them wear to buy “fun” and “wearable” outfits. When asking her how Monki plays a role in the content she makes, she told me:

The plus size market is pretty small. I'm gonna mention H&M again, for example. They have a really small plus size range and it's really boring. It's all plain colors and wide fitting clothes. And Monki, well yeah, they just make every piece in the bigger size. So, everything is colorful and full of prints. And of course, I want to inspire women with everyday outfits, but also do something crazy once in a while. And I think that that's where Monki comes in.

Melissa shared that she thinks other brands fail to put in effort into their plus-size ranges, because it is assumed that “plus-size” women “don't want to express themselves” and just “want something to hide their body”. She also shared that “not every store even has a plus-size corner” and the fact that plus-size women are only given a corner feels unfair to her, especially because plus-size clothes are often more expensive. Not being able to shop at the “normal section” and not fitting into “a category that the fashion industry made for us” creates feelings of alienation and exclusion. That is why, with a brand like Monki who makes every piece in every size, it “feels very comforting” to be able to go “into a normal store and find clothes your size”.

Ashley (27) expressed similar sentiments about past experiences with alienation with British fashion brand TopShop.

Because TopShop has such a static, and for their clothes and the categories they're going for... I don't feel like I can pull their clothes off. But because when Monki market their clothes, they market them to everyone and it helps me because I feel like, wow I can wear this. And that's what I really like because I feel like the clothes are made for people like me. Whereas when I see TopShop clothes, the people who shop there are often a size 6 or a size 8, and that's who they want to be wearing them. I know they make them up in a size 14, but like sometimes I try on stuff in there and it's like, oh that's not made for me.

Ashley believes that while brands like TopShop make clothes in bigger sizes, she can still sense that her body type is “not what the company envisioned while making the clothes”. She feels a clear distinction between “people like her” and the people TopShop are designing their clothes for.

Dealing with body-confidence issues when she was younger, wearing clothes that made her feel this way caused her to want to “cover up” and “hide myself away”. Nicole (22) also mentioned how struggling with body image has changed where she shops and how she expresses herself through fashion.

At Pull & Bear, their clothing is catered to the smaller girls, if you’ve noticed. The cutting of their clothes is very small. So, whenever I go into a Pull & Bear and I want to try on their clothes, it doesn't fit the way I want it to. I always feel super, super insecure because of it and I never want to shop there ever again.

Before this quote, Nicole was explaining to me how, due to gaining weight recently, she is not able to shop at stores like Pull & Bear anymore because they are “catered to smaller girls”. This has had a negative effect on her self-esteem, because she feels that her size does not match with who the brand is targeting. This has caused strong feelings of alienation, leading her to shop elsewhere. In discussing similar experiences with other interviewees, I realized that consumer identity project theory is not just a question of structure versus individual agency, but it is rather also about who is given more agency than others. At the heart of the consumer identity project lies the notion of choice, but what if choice is not available to everyone? In the process of self-making through the marketplace resources available to “plus-size” women, it appears that they are not able to create the narrative they want due to the limitations imposed on them. Their identity work is limited in the structure and categorization of the fashion industry, and as a result, are not given the same opportunities to create a coherent self-narrative. The intangible symbolic meaning embedded in plus-size clothing seems to have a negative connotation, as indicated by higher prices, smaller collections and “boring” styles. As a result, not fitting into socially constructed categories creates feelings of alienation and exclusion, leading to feelings of low self-esteem and self-efficacy, key components of one’s identity (Breakwell, 1986; as cited by Jantzen et al.,2006). If consumers do indeed cite the brand’s identity as a form of self-identity, and the brand is engaging in such exclusive behavior, we see them internalizing these categories and sizes as reflections of their worth. That is why, for Nicole, brands like Monki who have a more inclusive size-range help her eliminate those feelings.

That's the number one thing I love about Monki. I'm usually a size L or UK 12. But from Monki sizing, their S is an M and their M is an L. So, like, since I'm usually between M and L, I buy Monki clothing in size S. So, I feel better about myself, because the cutting is bigger. Maybe that's why I always gravitate towards Monki because self-esteem is a big thing for me.

Because instead of going to other shops, where you're an L, when in Monki you're an S... It just makes you feel better about yourself.

As a result, Monki helps Nicole “express myself in ways that I probably wouldn't be able to do with another brand of clothing”, because the inclusive size range gives her more self-esteem. Ashley expressed similar sentiments, by saying that she feels like “you can be yourself when you wear their clothes” because “they don't just stick to like one idealist picture of who their customer is going to be”. By tapping into identity needs such as self-esteem, Monki's inclusive size range gives alienated consumers a sense of value and worth. As explained in previous chapters, identity work is not just about asserting individuality. It also involves seeking validation and acceptance in order to feel like one belongs (Jenkins, 2014). The same can be applied to fashion, as social identification is as much a primary function as establishing distinctiveness. It allows us to present our bodies in meaningful ways, to ourselves and but also to others. Consumer identity is defined by one's perceived contrast towards others, as identity positions, rules, tastes, (and thus sizes) are collectively produced and reproduced by different actors (Ghigi & Sassatelli, 2018). What we see here, is that the sizes and thus expectations produced by different actors have translated to parts of their identities in a negative way. By internalizing the meanings imbedded in clothing sizes, we see female bodies becoming ‘plus size’ through a negotiation of the relationship between the body and societal expectations of femininity. This highlights how there can be negative consequences to perceiving a brand as a part of your self-concept. While a size ‘44’ or size ‘L’ can be objectively interpreted as a number or label, these arbitrary symbols have come to represent legitimized and judicable standards for the female body (McRobbie, 2004). These are not “plus-size women”, they are simply just women. The term itself already indicates that there are “normal sizes” and then there are “plus-sizes”, who are worthy of different levels of effort and consideration. Karimova et al. describe this experience as constrained and alienating, as much as liberating and fun (2017). However, it appears that the latter is only an experience for those who fit within the structure. With their inclusive size range, Monki has certainly made this experience more fun and liberating for those who have experienced alienation elsewhere. However, as we will see in the next section, inclusive efforts are not always an indicator of real social progress.

4.1.3 Matching Values and Lifestyles

The third way that the brand is able to establish a sense of *sisterhood and solidarity*, is by establishing matching values and lifestyles with their consumers. When asked why the brand appeals to them, all of the respondents in this study indicated some similarities between their sense of self and their perception of the brand. This was mostly illustrated by matching values and lifestyles between the brand and consumer. Respondents Naomi (26) and Lena (27) for instance, explained to me how they identify with Monki's sustainable efforts because they are living a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. Similarly, when asked why Monki is important to her, Ashley (27), shared how since she has "been trying to get more sustainable and help save the planet", she feels connected to the brand's sustainable efforts, such as sourcing sustainable cotton:

I mean I don't know how sustainable their cotton is, it's something I need to look into, but the fact that they're even saying like we are aware of this problem and we're trying to do something. That kinda speaks to me a lot more than brands just ignoring the cause.

Here, Ashley demonstrates how the intangible values and lifestyles within the brand, such as sustainability and eco-friendliness, speak to her more than other brands who refrain from speaking up about environmental issues. On Monki's website, the brand portrays their sustainability efforts under the phrase *Monki Cares*. On this page, they state that Monki Cares is more than just sourcing sustainable materials, but about how their entire business can be more sustainable. The page is described as a space to explain more about the brand's goals, commitments, policies and partnerships, and is divided into the following sub-categories: Materials, Garment Care, Recycling, Production, Partners and Jeanious Hacks. Each page is described as a 'project' and is presented in the form of an article containing visual and textual elements to provide the customer with in-depth background information and tips to be more environmentally friendly. By speaking up about these issues, Ashley feels a connection between her sense of self and the brand, and as a result, feels more drawn to shop there than at other stores. This is in line with self-congruity theory, which argues that consumers tend to choose brands that match their sense of self, because it enables them to express themselves more authentically (Agerup, 2011). These ideas are further reflected in a response by Jacqueline, who had the following response when asked if she feels as connected to brands other than Monki:

Not as much because with the other brands, because I only feel connections with their style. So, I feel like I have a similar style to this brand and that's it. But that can only go so far, right? Because people are much more than only their style. So, if you find a brand that kind of has similar values than you, that goes a long way I think.

Here, Jacqueline is exemplifying how value congruity plays a major role in how strongly she identifies with a brand. Because “people are much more than only their style”, she sees sharing similar values as an important quality to look for in a brand. This is in line with the ideas presented by Aagerup, who argues that the stronger a consumer identifies with a brand, the stronger he or she tends to commit to the brand and develop positive attitudes towards it (2011).

When asking Lena, a 27-year-old social worker, what values came to mind when she thinks about Monki, she explained the most meaningful value for her was mental health awareness. Living with borderline personality disorder, she explained how the “extremes” related to her mental illness “are very hard”, and that Monki has come to represent a form of therapy for her. She also explained how Monki is coming out with t-shirts related to mental health, and how excited she was to purchase one. When conducting netnographic observations, the topic of mental health was also present on the brand’s website, under the page *Monki Thinks*. This page contains various campaigns and articles on topics such as female empowerment, mental health, self-love and body positivity. The most recent campaign on this page is their partnership with Mental Health Europe, a non-governmental organization committed to the promotion of positive health and ending mental health stigma. In the campaign, called Embrace Your Feels, the brand explains the importance of acknowledging your emotions and daily tips to improve one’s mental health. An excerpt from the project is provided below (see Figure 1).

Embrace your feels.

Being human is a complex ride of emotions; and whether you’re having a good or a bad day, sometimes just accepting your feels is hard. We’ve teamed up with the real experts, Mental Health Europe to offer you a tiny-weeny drop of information in a sea-full of advice.

Figure 1

For Laura, such storytelling embedded in the brand’s online communication is an important part of her relationship with Monki, because it has helped her realize that “everybody can be who they are” and “that it's not necessary to be perfect”. Amber also touched upon self-acceptance when asked how Monki connects with her sense of self:

Right now I'm really working on myself, on self-acceptance and self-love. And that's really what they've been pushing recently, so in that way I guess I can connect to the brand cause I'm really trying to find myself and trying to accept myself and push myself. To be who I want to be and to live for myself. And as a brand, that's what they tell us what we need to do.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, consumers tend to choose brands that help move them closer to realizing their values and ideal selves (Belk, 1998). Above, Amber is demonstrating how Monki serves as a tool in her personal development journey towards more “self-acceptance and self-love”. In other words, Monki is described as helping Amber realize the importance of accepting oneself, and in that, is coming closer to becoming her ideal self (Belk, 1998).

Additionally, a netnographic analysis was done on the last category on Monki’s website is called *Monki Loves*, which is all about ‘fashion, music, illustrations, style and sisterhood’. This page contains various forms of content, including collaborations with people and projects. On this page, Monki introduces various female artists, models, authors with whom they have partnered with. Much like the *Monki Thinks* page, this category also touches upon female empowerment in a number of different ways, as illustrated by the quotes below.

“Empowering women is the driving force behind everything we do at Monki and has been from the beginning” says Jennie Dahlin Hansson, Managing Director at Monki.

Figure 2

Being a girl is never a flaw. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise. Girls are strong, brave and a force of nature. Sisterhood (which we will always salute) can and will change the world for the better. Just wait and see. Girls 4-ever <3.

Figure 3

Figure 2 shows a quote by the Managing Director at Monki, who states that empowering women has always been a core component of the brand’s culture. Likewise, in Figure 3 we see more notions of female empowerment, such as describing girls as “strong, brave and a force of nature” as well as the power of sisterhood, which they claim to always “salute”. During my interview process, almost all of my participants mentioned female empowerment as a value that they identified with and appreciated to see within the brand. When asked what values Jacqueline is drawn to specifically, she mentioned “women empowerment” because it is topic she already has interest in. It “drew her in” because the brand talks about “popular topics in the media right now” that “girls my age can relate to”. Similarly, when asked why the brand appeals to her, Lena

immediately said “because they love the feminists and I am a feminist”. Amber shared that she feels it is “good for women to have a brand or a company's supporting them, their true self, their feminine side” and how the brand is “very open about what they're standing for”. Additionally, by “starting a lot of conversations that other brands don't really get involved in”, Nicole felt that the empowering messages on Monki clothes are “more authentic” than other brands.

While Monki consumers may believe that these empowering messages are authentic and progressive, it is important to remember that brands often implement identity myths and ideological opportunities in their marketing communications in order to increase the perception of sameness between the brand and its consumers. In fact, a post-feminist perspective would argue that Monki is appropriating feminist themes of empowerment and choice, not to contribute to the cause, but to sell their products. This is a common business practice referred to as consumer feminism, in which feminist emancipation is treated as having the “freedom” and “choice” to purchase certain goods and engage in cultural or commercial practices (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Consumer feminism is said to be the product of consumer capitalism and feminism, sharing consumerism's view that consumption is the primary source of identity and social change. As a result, feminism is framed as something to be achieved through shopping; becoming a style that is easily acquired and worn (Riordan, 2001). In Monki's branding communication, they have clearly adopted the discourse of post-feminism. As indicated by Elsa, the Monki brand representative I spoke to, this rhetoric is not only directed to consumers, but are incorporated in the Monki DNA as well. The idea that the brand's “DNA” is made up of values such as “friendly, fun, empowering and brave”, demonstrate that post-feminist discourse and ideals have become a core component of the brand's assemblage. Internal stakeholders, like Elsa, are encouraged to transmit these values to their employees so that the people within the brand embody these values as well. However, as Riordan (2001) indicates, popularizing the word empowerment may do more harm than good if the real motive is social change. Encouraging individual empowerment through consumption often ends up “stunting women”, as they are told to work for themselves in that particular moment, rather than working collectively with other women to make real structural changes. Thus, it is important to be aware that representational changes, such as female empowerment and an inclusive size range, may appear to be more socially progressive, they often do not genuinely serve gender and social justice purposes (Riordan, 2001).

4.2 Creativity of the Collective

The second theme to emerge from my analysis has been called *Creativity of the Collective*. This theme represents the different ways Monki has been able to leverage the open source environment to their advantage, by tapping into their consumer's needs for self-expression. All of my interviewees seemed to be quite expressive on social media, being aspiring bloggers, influencers or YouTubers, who use these platforms and hobbies as ways to share, maintain or enhance their identities. By encouraging brand-driven self-expression, Monki has created a space where they invite customers to show their "style stories" while creating valuable content for the brand's marketing and advertising channels. In doing so, they tap into identity needs, enabling consumers to feel recognized and valued for their contribution. This constructs customer identities in that they express themselves through the clothes along with the values they attach to them. Much like the previous section, the following subsections will illustrate the axial codes that form this overarching theme. Each axial code will be discussed in relation to my netnographic observations, interview data and connections to previous literature.

4.2.1 Style as Reflection of the Self

As indicated by the name, this is a category that encompasses the different ways in which participants describe their style as a reflection of their sense of self. Throughout the interviews, all participants were asked what fashion means to them, sharing that fashion is a way for them to express themselves to the outside world. As a result 'fashion as self-expression' was noted twelve times throughout the dataset. When asking participants to describe their sense of style in order to learn more about their self-concept, almost all participants described their style as dynamic, noted thirteen times within the dataset. Quotes such as, "I don't really have one particular style", "My personal style is always different", "I have lots of styles within my personal style" and "I have multiple styles" all demonstrate the notion that participants have multiple selves (source). Amber, for instance, believes that "fashion is just a really great way of showing who you are". Hence, Amber uses fashion to portray her *actual* and/or *ideal self* to the outside world, as a reflection of how she sees herself, or how she would like to see herself (Jamal & Goode, 2001). Melissa, on the other hand, expresses herself through fashion so that "when people see me, they know what kind of girl I am", indicating that she uses fashion to express her *social self*, or *ideal social self*, by focusing more on how others may perceive her, or how she would like to be perceived (Jamal & Goode, 2001). These quotes support the notion that investing the self through objects is a key component of creating one's identity.

In representing the self (or selves) many participants explained how their outfits represent a reflection of their mood in that particular moment. This was noted fifteen times throughout the dataset. Besides expressing her actual self, Amber shared that fashion is also “a way to express the way I feel, embodying my spirit at the moment”. For Lena, expressing her moods through fashion has become a form of therapy for coping with her mental illness.

I really need it to survive, because I have borderline and all the extremes are very hard. So, this is something that me that's helps me a lot and I don't know what to do without it actually... the moods that you're in and the feelings you can bring them out. Sometimes it's also a mask. But I need it, because if I don't have it, it's too hard for me to survive in this world.

Many participants also highlighted the transformative power of fashion in constructing new feelings. Melissa loves clothes and “what it can do to people”, and Jacqueline stated that “clothes can really transform you”. Rebecca shared similar thoughts, by stating “your whole mood just changes. Depending on how you feel and what you are wearing”. Bright colors, for instance, were often mentioned as a key characteristic of Monki, as well as a way to lift one’s mood. Clara, Jacqueline and Amber all shared how wearing colors makes them feel happier in their daily lives. Lena also related to this, stating that she wears colors to brighten up her “darker days”, as a coping mechanism to “feel colorful, although I'm not that colorful in my mind”. These quotes demonstrate how participants use fashion to construct symbolic representation of themselves, by being able to express their internal experiences to the outside world.

In describing their self-concept and relationship to fashion, many participants reflected the ideas presented by Russell Belk in his work *Possessions and the Extended Self* (1988). For instance, Clara mentioned that “when you're wearing an outfit it kind of becomes part of you”, to which Jacqueline added, “I really feel like clothes and fashion are who I am. I enjoy it a lot, so it's really part of myself. And if I don't have that a big part of me is missing, so I feel less confident.” These quotes demonstrate how participants use see fashion as an extension of their sense of self. Like Jacqueline, many other respondents indicated that whether in the past or present, their style represented a reflection of their level of confidence at the time. This was noted fourteen times throughout the data-set, as consumers spoke to me about their experiences with self-confidence and overcoming insecurities. This was especially the case for Ashley, who stated:

Finding confidence in myself has definitely been the biggest catalyst in developing my personal style. When I wasn't confident in myself, I wasn't dressing the way I wanted to and I was always trying to cover up. So, looking back I can definitely see how my own self-worth

has influenced my fashion choices because if I didn't feel good about myself, there's no way I'd wear the clothes that I wear now.

Reflecting on her identity work, Ashley came to realize how her self-worth plays a major role in her fashion choices. Developing more self-esteem, a core component of her identity, has been the “biggest catalyst” for her to become who she is now. In the words of Belk, it seems that as her “core self” evolved over time, the parts of her “extended self” had to evolve with her (1988). This shows how Ashley uses fashion to define, maintain and strengthen her sense of self. Besides reflecting the self to the outside world, it was found that a large part of defining participants’ identities was reliant on seeking individuality and authenticity.

4.2.2 Quest for Individuality and Authenticity

In getting to know more about my participants, almost all of them indicated that a primary part of their identity work is aimed at striving for individuality. This relates to the distinctiveness component of one’s identity, which gives the self a sense of uniqueness, especially in relation to others (Jantzen et al., 2006). Many participants took pride in looking different than others. Clara (19), for instance, likes being different because it “shows a part of your personality” which she sees as something “brave”. Rebecca (19) believes that “you need to have your own style” and has recently been “trying to follow my own thing... Be my own person”. Both Clara, Rebecca and Nicole indicated that they did not always feel comfortable pursuing their own individuality and attributed their progress to different role models in their lives, such as romantic partners, friends and celebrities. In praising individuality and uniqueness, many participants condoned the idea of being “mainstream” and following too many trends. Both Lena and Clara “don’t want to be like the masses” and Ashley “can't just be in a carbon copy of what everyone wears”. Additionally, Hannah finds it “annoying” to see “so many people wearing the same things”, and Amber believes that “when people follow trends too much that they kind of lose a piece of themselves”. Giving into trends was perceived by many as not staying true to oneself, and if participants did admit being influenced by trends, they ensured they still used it in their “own way”. As a result, staying authentic amidst a whirlwind of trends proved to be a primary form of identity work as well among participants. The need to feel authentic was shown through phrases such as “I’m just being me” (Melissa), “As long as I feel authentic” (Amber) and “I think it’s important to stay true to yourself” (Rebecca).

As seen in the theoretical framework, consumer demand is a driving force behind economic growth, and is both encouraged and maintained by the market through discourse surrounding

individualization and choice (Larson & Patterson, 2018). In Amber's case, Monki's "unique" and "playful" brand identity enables her to pursue feelings of freedom:

Their whole identity for me is sewn into their clothes. And when I wear their clothes, I feel like I'm wearing freedom. It sounds weird, but I'm wearing what I want to wear and I'm wearing who I want to be. That's kind of how their identity translates to me.

For Amber, wearing Monki clothes is described as a liberating experience. The symbolic value of Monki clothing makes her feel like she is "wearing freedom", as she is able to feel both authentic and closer to realizing her ideal self. For many participants, like Clara, Monki was described as more liberating than other brands in that they offer more opportunities for self-expression and creativity.

Monki is definitely more creative, to get out of your comfort zone. When I walk into the store it already inspires me like, "Oh, maybe I can like put that together with that thing", like something I've never done before and they actually allow you to do that. Instead of H&M, where you can buy a white sweater and jeans for example, but you don't have like a lot of opportunities to do something different than others.

In Clara's eyes, the brand encourages her to "get out of your comfort zone" because it is more creative than other brands. As a creative person herself, she values having more "opportunities to do something different than others", in order to express her individuality through her clothing.

I love being creative and they allow me to do that. And you know for me personally if I can be creative, I feel more comfortable so I can more express myself better. I know its marketing, but I think they are doing a really great job marketing their stuff. And they are really like positioning themselves differently than other brands, because of the vibe that they reach out to people.

Monki "allows" Clara to satisfy her creative needs more than other brands, which enables her to express herself in better ways. Interestingly, she admitted that she knows that this is due to Monki's marketing and positioning strategy. She is able to reflect on her position as a consumer, and the potential ways she is being coerced or influenced. This reflexive behavior in consumers has been recognized by other scholars, too. In his study on the cynical aspects of consumer morality, Bertilsson (2015) describes this behavior as 'enlightened disbelief in the morality of brands' (p. 454). This kind of self-awareness allows consumers to put themselves in the position of marketers and critically evaluate their consumption activities. Consumers appear to feel a sense of morality in

admitting to the ways they are persuaded to purchase certain products (Bertilsson, 2015). Brands increasingly tie their brand to notions of individuality and choice, in order to encourage consumer demand. Amber and Clara clearly feel a sense of emancipation due to Monki, by being able to express themselves more creatively and authentically than other brands. However, the choices they are given operate within a structure created by the market, and their decisions are still steered in particular directions within this structure. This is an example of how brands like Monki are “enabling and constraining, both facilitating consumers’ abilities to play with identity while also circumscribing them, entertaining consumers while inculcating them” (Thompson & Tian, 2008; as cited by Larsen & Patterson, 2018, p. 199). As the above quotes indicate, these consumers are more focused on becoming “free” and “creative” using Monki products, rather than focusing on the products themselves. This demonstrates how Monki is used as a tool through which these consumers can create their own meaning, depending on their individual identity needs and aspirations. “Consumers choose lives, not brands” and thus we see how brands like Monki “enable and empower the freedom of consumers so that it is likely to evolve in particular directions” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 244; Lury, 2004).

4.2.3 Enabling Freedom and Creativity

This theme demonstrates how Monki has found a way to leverage the open source environment to their advantage, by tapping into consumer’s needs for self-expression. As we saw in the previous section, Monki feeds the consumer’s desire for individuality and authenticity by offering “more daring” opportunities to be heard and seen from the masses. Participants attributed this sense of freedom and creativity to “fun” and “playful” brand elements, such as “bright colors”, “eccentric twists”, “authentic designs”, “unique store layouts” and “quirky” pieces. Aside from their innovative products and designs, Monki also enables consumers to express their freedom and creativity in the online space. As indicated by the previous subsections, the participants in this study are quite expressive people, both on- and offline. Many participants are aspiring YouTubers, bloggers, influencers who use their platforms and hobbies as ways to communicate, share and develop their identities. By tapping into various identity needs, and utilizing the affordances of the Web 2.0 landscape, Monki has created a space where they invite customers to show their “style stories”.

One way that Monki has done this, is through creating their own hashtag called #monkistyle. While conducting netnographic observations, the following explanations of the hashtag were found along with instructions on how to use it.

**Wanna show the world your individual Monki vibe?
Add @monki and #monkistyle in your caption text, or simply tag us in
your photo and we'll share your style stories right here!**

**If you see a look you LOVE below, you can click through and shop
straight from the feed. Pretty cool, right?**

Figure 4

**We love seeing ALL of you beautiful, unique people.
Keep sharing your amazing selves with @monki and
#monkistyle**

Figure 5

As Figure 4 shows, consumers are invited to share their 'individual Monki vibe' on social media in a number of different ways. Consumers can use various social media features, such as mentions (@), the hashtag (#) or tagging, to incorporate the brand into their user-generated content. Additionally, in Figure 5, it can be seen how Monki encourages their customers to produce such content. In using words such as 'individual Monki vibe' 'beautiful', 'unique' and 'amazing', Monki is tapping into identity needs such as distinctiveness, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Additionally, linking their brand to phrases such as "Monki vibe" and "style stories" shows how intangible and symbolic elements are emphasized in order to establish strong connections with their consumers. As explained earlier, Instagram has a broad search feature enabling users to search Instagram content by account names, locations and hashtags. When users search using #monkistyle, they are directed to a filtered page that only features posts that have incorporated the hashtag. A screenshot of this page is featured below.

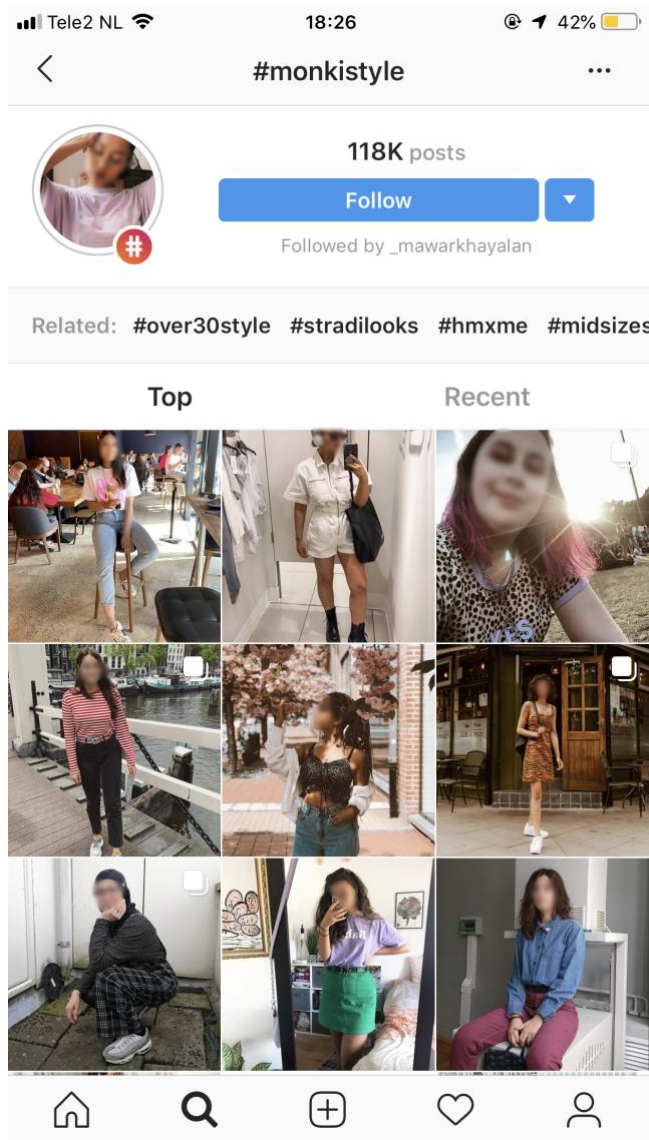


Figure 6

As demonstrated by Figure 6, #monkistyle has over 118K user-generated posts on Instagram, and new photos are being added every day from all around the world. While reaching out to users through this filtered page, I came into contact with Elsa. She replied to my direct message on Instagram saying that she would like to participate in my study but was unsure if she could give a customer’s point of view because she works for the brand. I replied saying that I would still love to get a chance to speak with her, in order to get more insight on how the brand uses the hashtag. When asking her why she posted a photo using #monkistyle, she explained to me that this is one of her responsibilities as a ‘Monki scout’. According to the Monki website, Monki scouts are:

...the ultimate ambassadors of #monkistyle. They know our products inside out, how to wear them best, and of course, are total selfie queens. Our scouts work in our Monki stores around

the world, so they're our global #monkistyle eyes and ears.
(https://www.monki.com/en_eur/blog/scouts.html)

According to this quote, Monki scouts are seen by the brand as brand ambassadors. When asking Elsa more about her tasks as a scout, she explained to me that Monki employees can also become scouts and “participate heavily in creating content for online resources that go onto Monki's channels”. Each week, the scouts are given “a list of items that are new in store” or popular products “that are pushed mostly at this moment”, pick their favorite items and take pictures wearing them. Scouts are free to style items how they want, with minimal requirements such as “good lighting”. Then, those photos are posted by Monki scouts on their personal Instagram accounts, using the hashtag #monkistyle. Besides contributing to #monkistyle content, they also interact with customers who have also posted content:

As Monki scouts, we can reach out to customers who have used the hashtag via the comment section and ask, ‘Hey there you're looking dreamy, we would like to use your picture on our online channels’. And in order to get consent to use the picture, the person has to reply with #YESMonkiStyle. So, if you reply using #YESMonkiStyle, it just means that you give the consent to be reposted. And it's mainly just an easy filter for us to find these pictures in a whole range of pictures that are tagged using our brand.

As Elsa explains, Monki scouts help the brand find valuable user generated content that can be used on their online channels. According to her, “anybody can become a scout” and one does not necessarily have to work in a Monki store. If a customer replies using #YESMonkistyle, they have a chance to be featured on their online gallery. The online gallery is a page on the Monki website featuring consumer-generated brand stories (Gensler et al., 2013). The gallery features photos taken by customers who have shared their “style stories” using the hashtag. A screenshot of this gallery is featured below.

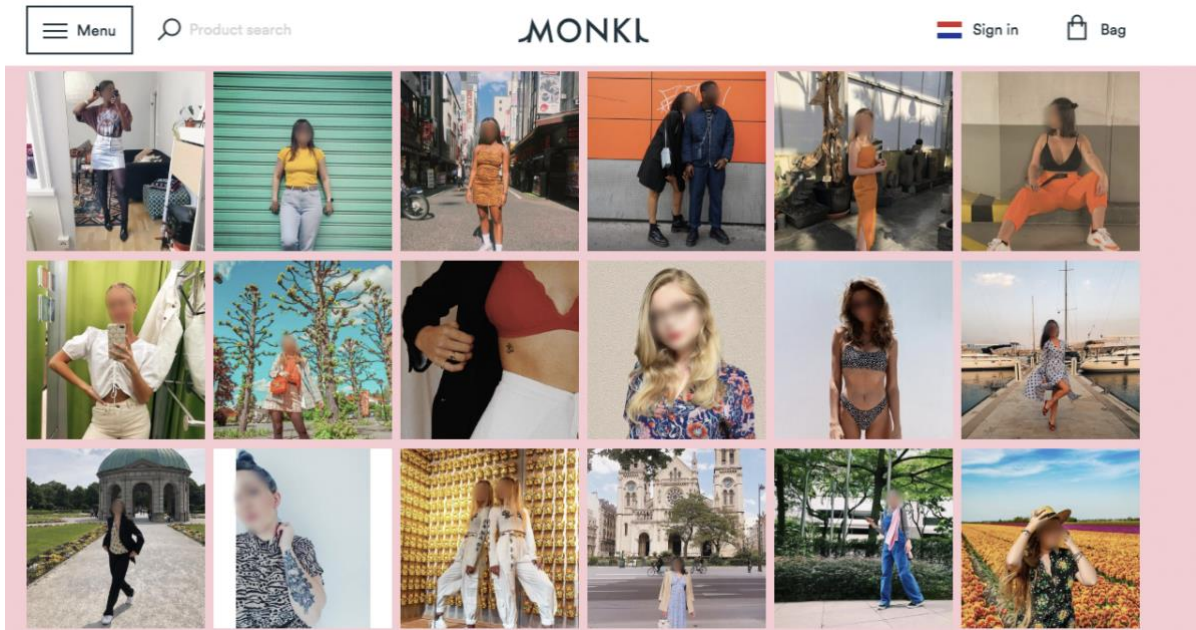


Figure 7

The website gallery resembles an Instagram feed, and has a very similar layout to the hashtag page on Instagram (see Figure 7). The gallery even incorporates Instagram features into it. By clicking on one of the photos, customers can see the picture up close, along with a direct link to the product and the user’s Instagram page. An example is shown below.

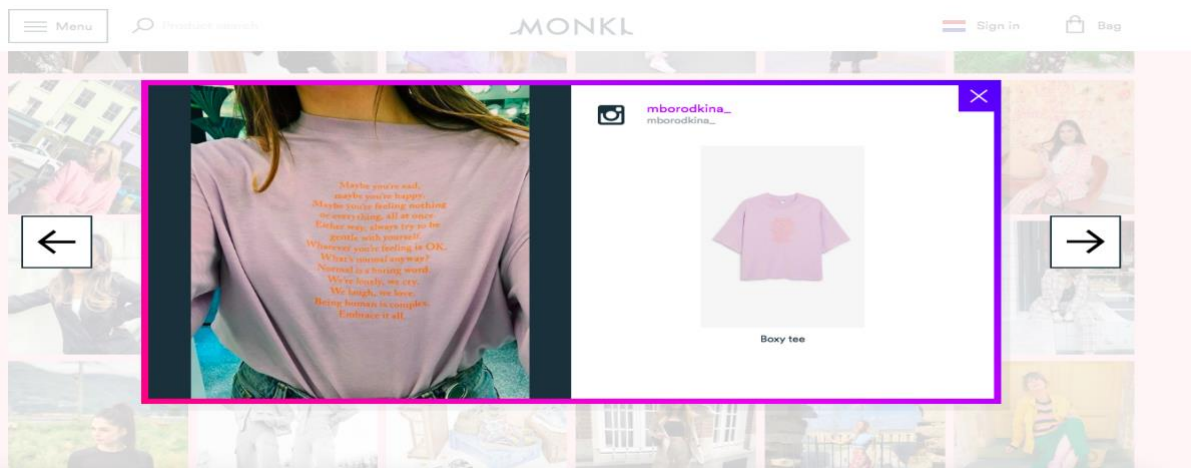


Figure 8

Figure 8 depicts a close-up example of consumer generated content that was featured on the website gallery. The photo taken by the consumer is put side by side with the product image on the website, along with her Instagram username and a link to her page. If other customers like an item, they are able to “shop straight from the feed”. When talking to my participants about the hashtag, some of them told me that their content has been reposted by the brand. Lena, for instance, said

she was featured on the Monki's Instagram account last year. She proudly showed it to me and said she "loves it when they repost me". Additionally, Naomi said that she had been reposted on the website gallery, but without her consent.

I heard from friends that they posted my photo on their website, so I didn't even know. When my friend told me that she saw me on the website, I was like, 'Huh? What?'. But I'm okay with that, I thought it was cool. And they put my name under it. If they just use your photo and put it somewhere without your name, then it's a shame of course. But if they use your name with it, then it's really nice to see.

In this quote, Naomi mentions how she had to hear from a friend that her photo had been featured on the Monki website. Even though it was posted without her consent, Naomi stated she did not mind because they "put my name under it". This is indicative of the perceived value that consumers get from posting this content. Customers have a chance to be recognized (by the brand and other users), given credit for their efforts and as Nicole put it - more "clout".

Reflecting on these findings, it is clear that Monki has found successful ways to both tap into consumer's identity needs and to leverage the open-source environment to their advantage (Fournier & Avery, 2011). By creating the #monkistyle hashtag, the brand invites consumers to create valuable user-generated content, such as consumer generated stories, that the brand can then use for marketing and advertising purposes. This is an example of how the brand has tapped into the opportunities for creative self-expression that the platform has to offer. In doing so, Monki has been able to "create new market linkages" and stimulate "consumer insights that create innovative brand value and impact" (Verwey, 2015). Image driven social media platforms have become a new form of window shopping, and Monki has successfully embedded themselves into the online conversation by facilitating the collective creative value of consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Verwey, 2015). This exemplifies open-source branding as it involves participatory, collaborative and socially linked behaviors in which consumers are regarded as authors of branded content. However, with the creation of their own hashtag, as well as the implementation of Monki scouts, the brand has been able to somewhat manage the online space. This is an example of how the brand not only participates in online conversations, but also actively leads and guides them, as Monki scouts both facilitate content for #monkistyle, as well as encourage it by interacting with customers and making them feel recognized. Instagram has enabled Monki to create its own channel for user generated content, facilitating connections between consumers and allowing them to self-organize around the brand (Verwey, 2015). By inviting consumers to share their "style stories", the brand is able to communicate brand experiences through storytelling. This allows Monki to "authentically express its brand identity, while also creating the space for brand

consumers to symbolically express and shape their identities in relation to the brand”. This could explain why many participants view Monki as more authentic than other brands, due to their ability to imbed storytelling throughout their branding strategy.

Additionally, as Verwey (2015) argues, any discussion surrounding value must involve inquiry as to who is benefitting from the value being created. Even though these consumers willingly participate in value co-creation, there are scholarly concerns about the exploitation of free labor within these open-source contexts. In a tangible sense, Monki appears to be gaining the most from these collaborations, as consumers find themselves adding value while still having to pay for it. However, Verwey argues that it is equally important to consider that the opportunities for self-expression around a brand can often meet highly personal needs. For this reason, she argues that,

In the process of collaborative value creation, the role of both producer and consumer is adopted, and within the complex dynamic that evolves from this role enactment, participants assume the role of both provider and beneficiary, and therefore both parties benefit from collaborative prosumption in the digital brandscape, in both tangible and intangible forms.
(p. 336)

Brand meaning is co-constructed by consumers through the ways in which Monki is able to express and enhance participants’ identities, which involves opportunities for liberation, validation and recognition. In response to this, one could argue that consumer’s “highly personal needs” have been fostered through marketplace discourses surrounding individualization and choice. This highlights what scholars have identified as a dialectical tension between individualism and commodification, where “changes in one stimulate changes in the other” (Campbell, 2005; as cited by Larsen & Patterson, 2018). According to these authors, identity struggles are a major outcome of these contradictions. In pursuit for identity, consumers find themselves “operating under tremendous strain” as they negotiate both personalized and commodified experiences (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). Identity projects are market-mediated, and consumers are indeed ‘fed a mass-marketed, pre-packaged, commodified form of difference’ (Halnon, 2005; as cited by Larsen & Patterson, 2018). As Lury argues, a brand represents a ‘platform for action’, inserted into the social to ‘program’ the freedom of consumers to unfold down certain paths (2004).

4.3 Embodying the Digital Brandscape

The last overarching theme that emerged from my analysis has been called *embodying the digital brandscape*. The term brandscape represents the symbolic environment constructed by consumers as they draw upon marketplace resources to construct a sense of self (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård). It was found that due to the affordances of new media technologies, along with an increasing emphasis on the expressive value of brands, a social, cultural and economic branded landscape has emerged; “one that is complex and challenging, and perhaps not as inviting or collaborative as many suggest” (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 4). The various sub-categories within this theme all represent various tensions and struggles my participants seem to experience as they navigate through both technological and marketplace structures in their everyday lives.

4.3.1 Social media as Inspiration and Self-Expression

In order to see what role visual social media plays in the process of brand- and consumer identity co-construction, I also asked participants various questions about what social media means to them, both personally and in relation to brands. All of my participants indicated some sense of ambivalence towards social media, in that there are both good and bad sides to it, and these sides can be quite extreme. In terms of perceived advantages of social media, participants had various things to say. For Clara, “Instagram for me is really nice because I get inspired there and express myself there. It’s just a really nice platform to share my thoughts and my statements on.” Nicole added to that, by saying “I understand social media as a platform for people to express their feelings and themselves. Where people can be their true, authentic selves, vent out your feelings and express yourself through pictures.” Besides enabling self-expression, Lena and Hailey see social media as a place to “meet new people”, while Rebecca believes it “widens her view of the world” and uses it “just for fun”.

When asked where participants get inspired, almost all of them mentioned social media as a key source of style inspiration. Instagram sparked Jacqueline’s “passion for fashion”, and Melissa added to this by saying,

I get inspired by other people online and this is something I need. It sparks your creativity with creating new outfits, and that's definitely thanks to social media and all the other girls I am following.

Here, Melissa illustrates how social media and the influencers she follows are an important source of inspiration for her. She shared with me that she was not into trends or fashion before social media, and believes it kick-started her interest in fashion. Besides being a source of inspiration, participants also shared how they strive to inspire others through social media, too. For Melissa,

this is the most rewarding thing about running her curvy outfit blog, “What keeps me going the most is when people say, ‘looking at you makes me feel better about myself and you inspire me to try out new things’”. Additionally, Jacqueline shared that this desire to inspire others is why she used the hashtag #monkistyle,

Sometimes I would like to get inspiration from the hashtag, so I thought if I post a picture under the hashtag, then people can find my picture and maybe they can get inspired from how I style my outfit.

Here, Jacqueline shows how her desire to inspire others on social media was one of the motivations behind posting her consumer generated brand story. Validation from others proved to be another advantage of social media, as Rebecca feels “it's nice to have that kind of assurance that people really like what I'm doing”. Additionally, both Hailey and Melissa run a blog outside of their Instagram account, but admitted to gravitating more towards Instagram to share content because its more convenient and accessible. While participants had varying answers regarding the role social media plays in their lives, the one thing that became clear in this category is how embedded brands are in some participants' social media activities. Many participants who are aspiring bloggers or influencers mentioned the job opportunities they have been given through social media. Naomi and Melissa frequently collaborate with brands, and both Nicole and Naomi attributed their large Instagram followings to posting branded content. Additionally, Nicole and Melissa tag the brands they are wearing in their photos, so that their followers do not have to ask them where their clothes are from.

4.3.2 Internal Struggles on Social Media

As indicated above, when asking my participants about how they understand social media and the role it plays in their lives, there were equal accounts of both positive and negative aspects. This category represents the negative aspects of social media, and the internal struggles experienced by participants because of it. One of the most common things that participants struggle with, is feeling addicted and dependent on social media. In relation to this, Ashley admitted that “I wish I wasn't so dependent on it, but I am the person who makes me dependent on it”. Adding to this, Amber said,

One of the negative sides to social media is that, when you wake up, it's the first thing you check. And sometimes I'll wake up and my finger will automatically go to certain icons. I feel like we've let it into our lives a little bit too much. Social media has almost become like reality media. Cause we can't live without it and it's kind of a struggle sometimes to fight it.

Reflecting on her own habits, Amber shares that she feels social media has become too integrated into her life. She admits it has become too habitual to check her social media accounts, becoming a “reality media” because it is so hard to live without and fight against. Other internal struggles regarding social media revolved around feelings of pressure. Both Melissa and Naomi feel pressure to create content to grow or maintain their audience, which makes their social media activities feel like a burden. Ashley shared that she used to feel “pressure to look perfect in every photo” but this became less of a concern for her, as she became more conscious of the content she consumes. Many participants mentioned how the constant positive representations of people’s lives on social media have negatively impacted their self-esteem. Clara realized that the “perfect illusions” she was constantly seeing on social media became “a danger to her mental health”. Ashley shared similar thoughts, explaining that when “people are showing you the best parts of their life” it can “make everything out to be like rose tinted glasses and that everything's perfect when it's not”. Other participants added to this with phrases such as “a picture is just a moment”, “not everything is perfect” and making the distinction between social media and “real life”. As a way to combat these “perfect illusions” online, Clara explained to me how she is trying to make “real content”, by also posting about negative moments in her life.

Most of my pictures have a caption that is very real. But I also try to make it not too sad, I cannot post like every single day a picture of me feeling down. So now I'm trying to find a balance, like how much should I post? How much shouldn't I?

Interestingly, while Clara strives to be more “real” on her social media platforms, she still struggles to find a balance as to how much of her negative feelings she should reveal online. Other participants also shared sentiments about limited self-expression, like Melissa, who refrains from sharing too much online because “I don’t want to get into discussions with people”. Due to a negative experience where she received a lot of backlash, she no longer expresses her emotions on her blog because “the internet has become a crazy place for people with opinions”. Likewise, while Nicole claimed that in her eyes, social media is a place for people to be share their “authentic self”, she revealed to me that the majority of her followers “don’t know who I really am” and “don’t even know my real name”. In addition to this, she said “I only show them what I want to show them”. The contradictions implied here highlight the identity struggles users face in using the platform to express who they are, while feeling like they need to adhere to certain rules or expectations. Other participants also mentioned trying to be “more real” on Instagram, by showing more parts of their personality through the Instagram stories feature. Stories are a feature on Instagram in which users can upload temporary photos or videos that appear in a slideshow format on their followers’ feeds, but are only shown for twenty-four hours. Participants like Melissa, Ashley and Carla appear to use

the stories feature to show more of the “real” versions of themselves, because it is perceived as a less serious form of content sharing. Ashley indicated that she does not do the same on her profile grid, because she wants to “keep that for nicer photos”.

It appears that as platforms for self-expression, users can use different features of social media applications to share different versions of the self. For instance, participants see the stories feature on Instagram as a way to express their *actual self*, while their profile grid is deemed more appropriate for representing their *ideal social self* (Jamal & Goode, 2001). As Web 2.0 is built on feedback, engagement and interactivity, we have seen how these platforms offer new alternative means for self-expression. As indicated in the paragraphs above, the emergence of these platforms into our lives have not only enhanced traditional forms of self-expression but has also provided users with unlimited access to them. Interestingly, in back in 2003, Lysloff already expressed caution regarding the expressive opportunities embedded in the online social experience. She made an early connection between the digital and ‘the postmodern notion of the fragmented, multiple self’:

When we go online, the computer extends our identity into a virtual world of disembodied presence, and at the same time, it also incites us to take on other identities. We lurk in, or engage with, on-line lists and usenet groups that enable different versions of ourselves to emerge dialogically. The computer, in this way, allows for a new kind of performativity, an actualization of multiple and perhaps idealized selves through text and image. (Lysloff, 2003, p. 255; as cited by Kozinets, 2015)

What struck me the most about this quote, is despite the time that has passed, Lysloff’s concerns are more applicable than ever. We now have a plethora of platforms that allow us to digitally extend our identities. Even within specific platforms, such as Instagram, there are different features through which users can share different versions of themselves. Later on, other scholars have shown how the integration of online social experiences into our lives have changed personal and professional relationships, as well as power dynamics between various actors (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Kozinets, 2015; Verwey, 2015,). As assemblages themselves, social media networks have become increasingly intertwined with existing social norms and systems that encourage radical decentralization, radical trust, collective intelligence and personal connection (O’Reilly, 2005; as cited by Fuchs, 2014). As a result, these networks are arguably inserting themselves into a consumer-decision making process that was previously in the hands of other actors (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; as cited by Kozinets, 2015). Additional research has shown that as alternative means of self-expression increase (both brand and non-brand related), the self-expressive value of brands decrease (Chernev & Gal, 2009; as cited by Verwey, 2015). Thus, the duality of social media experienced by my participants is an embodiment of the digital brandscape:

social media have become platforms for both the production of surplus value, as well as power struggles between brand producers and consumers (Verwey, 2015).

4.3.3 Dissociating from Brands

The third category within this theme is dissociating from brands. This category represents the different ways participants describe disassociating from brand-generated content, by focusing more on people instead of brands. As indicated in the previous section, it can be argued that as consumers are increasingly faced with more opportunities for self-expression, there is a perceived drop in the self-expressive value of brands (Verwey, 2015). Many scholars have defined this phenomenon as brand saturation, demonstrating how the personal relevance of individual brands have arguable decreased as new, alternative ways to express the self have become integrated into our lives (Cherney & Gal, 2009; as cited by Verwey, 2015). Additionally, social media is informing the consumer more than ever before, shaping their decisions and opinions by more and more entities outside the brand's influence; a key characteristic of the open-source context and the digital brandscape (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Verwey, 2015). As a result of these developments, it was found that participants are detaching themselves from specific brands and concentrating more on other sources of inspiration.

Participants dissociating from brands was first indicated by quotes such as "I don't like to stick to one brand" (Noami), "I don't really have one go-to brand" (Amber), and "I try to keep it simple, without too many brands" (Rebecca). Many consumers admitted to not adhering to one brand, focusing on pieces and versatility. It seemed that in doing so, participants feel a stronger sense of agency within the given structure of the brand and/or market. For Ashley, if she's "just looking for a particular thing", "it doesn't really matter from what brand it is". On social media, Amber said "I don't follow that many brands", to which Melissa added "I feel like the content brands create does not match with what I want to see". For her, as well as others, it was found that participants are more inspired by influencers and how people style together different items. Influencers and other style role models were perceived as more convincing or interesting than brands, as Rebecca indicates here,

I used to follow more brands, but I've noticed that it's more interesting to see how certain people are, you know, combining a lot of brands to make their own style then just to follow one brand.

Again, praising individuality, Rebecca is much more impressed by those who are "combining a lot of brands" to then "make their own style". According to Larsen & Patterson (2018), this behavior can

be seen as a response to the pressure consumers experience in the contemporary digital landscape. These authors state that the combination of different brands illustrates a narrative process of 'decommodification', especially in consumers of mass-market fashion, which makes space for uniqueness and personal agency within the market structure (Larson & Patterson, 2018). Additionally, Jacqueline expressed more interest in looking at "what people are wearing and how people are styling the items", because:

I want to say that the brand itself or the clothes itself empower me, but it's just a piece of cloth. Right? So, I think the people behind that and how they interpret the clothes... That's what empowers me.

For Jacqueline, the "message behind the fashion" is more empowering than just an item of clothing. Jacqueline demonstrates that it is the symbolic value of fashion, over the material qualities of the clothing that empower her in her day to day life. In addition to this, Melissa explained to me that her main inspiration sources are her favorite British bloggers,

And it's not only the fashion that inspires me, but also, they're really easy going and it feels like when they're posting something, it feels like you're connecting. Although they have 73,000 followers and yeah, they really big, but they're just really normal. And what that's also what inspires me to do it on my account and blog.

For Melissa, the connection she feels between her and her favorite bloggers are what inspires her, too. Naomi, on the other hand, does follow a few brands on social media, but only if the brand is "a bit smaller" and has a "more authentic feed". By authentic, she means content containing "not only the product photos that you have on the website as well", because she finds that "boring". Rather, what motivates her to follow a brand on social media "when a brand uses a lot of influencers and they repost photos... because that inspires you how to wear it." As Naomi indicates, when following a brand on social media, she looks for more elements that just the functional aspects of the brand, like product information. She believes that brands come across as more authentic and inspiring when they incorporate photos from influencers, because she can then take inspiration from them for her own looks. This exemplifies how Gensler et al. (2013) argue that consumer-generated stories are becoming more convincing than traditional marketing and advertising techniques. For Nicole, in order to want to follow a brand, interaction is a must:

I guess it's all about like their social media interaction because Monki is so, should I say, down to earth when it comes to interacting with their fans, you know, they're following. When they personally comment on pictures and stuff.

For Nicole, an important part of a brand's social media presence is interacting with the audience. Additionally, Naomi states that while she believes social media is good for brands as "it's a good way to get a bigger audience", "it also gets a bit harder because there's so many. So where do you go? Where do you shop?". This is an example of what Cherney and Gal (2009) describe as brand saturation, in that now that there are so many brands available on social media, Nicole finds it hard to decide where to shop. This shows that as more and more brands enter the online space, it is harder to grab the consumer's attention in a sea of a million other brands. Besides a brand's online presence, participants mentioned other external influences that shape their opinion of brands online. For instance, Nicole looked up Monki's sustainability rating online and found that they have a rating of C+. However, while she is aware of this, she still believes that the brand is "more authentic" than others. Additionally, Ashley mentioned how she follows a hashtag on Instagram called #AverageGirlSize. This hashtag was started by a plus-size blogger who orders clothes in a larger size from popular brands who typically "cater to smaller girls". The brand helps Ashley see which brands are "size 14 friendly" and actually put in effort to make clothes for girls of her body type. Additionally, it inspires her to be more confident, "I follow that hashtag because it brings up girls who are of a similar size to me. Like mid-size, who are rocking their clothes, feeling great about themselves". Thus, social media allows her to access content and link with people who are similar to her, from which she can get inspired and feel more comfortable with herself. These are all examples of how external sources are influencing consumer's perceptions of brands and branded content (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Gensler et al., 2013). While this has certainly changed the way brands must operate in the digital landscape, it has also resulted in various identity struggles within the consumer.

4.3.4 Consumer Identity Struggles

Consumer identity struggles is the last embodiment of the digital landscape that emerged from my analysis. It was found that as consumers become more informed, aware and critical of branded content, they face identity struggles like feelings of shame and guilt while constantly being stimulated, inspired or pressured into buying more. With regards to social media facilitating new sources for inspiration, some participants also highlighted that there are negative consequences, too. Ashley shared that, "as much as I don't want to admit it, I do buy things when I see it on people's Instagram. It definitely pushes me to buy or try new things." In addition to this, Jacqueline

admitted, "I hate to say this, but honestly since starting an Instagram, I buy so many more clothes... Which is not the way to go, I know."

As indicated in the previous section, new sources of inspiration are convoluting the consumer-decision-making process. Ashley, for instance, attributed social media to her increased awareness about brands. Following people who "call brands out" and hearing about "scandals" related to "terrible working conditions" have changed her view on brands such as H&M or Zara. Besides Ashley, Nicole and Jacqueline, also shared that Monki's affiliation with H&M did make them skeptical about how honest the brand really is. When brands become entangled with our cultures and identities, any scandals, mistakes or forms of deceit are inclined to be criticized and rejected. Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård (2007) argue that as ethics have made their way into branding strategies, values such as equality, freedom and justice and other values typically associated with politics are increasingly present in branding communications. Such strategies have already been observed within Monki, as they attach post-feminist rhetoric to their brand to potentially position themselves as a 'morally sound persona' (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007). As a result, the expressive nature of consumption has arguably created a moralized brandscape in which both consumers and producers are 'increasingly engaged in a moralized discourse' (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007). However, many still admitted to shopping at brands they were skeptical about. At the same time, participants were very explicit about admiring Monki's marketing technique, noted eleven times throughout the dataset. Participant's described it as a "new kind of marketing", "personal branding" and more "modern". I found it interesting that participants admitted to feelings skepticism and admitting persuasion, because it showed that they are reflexive about their positions as consumers against brands. They are to some extent self-aware about the ways they are coerced but continue to either turn a blind eye or give into shopping habits.

Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård's study similarly revealed how young consumers are often aware when a brand does not live up to its promises. However, despite negative attitudes or increased awareness, they still find themselves buying products from that brand. Their study suggests that "consumers prefer to forgive and forget and have the capability to disconnect the political self from the consuming self" (2007, p. 415). Throughout my research, it was observed that many interviewees shared feelings of guilt and shame surrounding their consumption habits, as topics such as fast-fashion, sweatshops and environmental impact came up in our discussions. While many participants admitted to wanting to change their shopping habits, they also admitted finding it difficult to restrain themselves, due to constantly being exposed to a constant stream of inspiration sources. Additionally, these scholars highlight how it appears that immoral company behavior seems to only be an issue when consumers are personally affected by it (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007). This is especially present in my participants, when comparing their reactions to

specific organizational concerns. For instance, as we saw in the theme *sisterhood and solidarity*, many interviewees boycott or resist certain brands who have made them feel alienated due to their body type. However, when it comes to issues such as exploiting the third world and the dangers of climate change, it seems easier for them to turn a blind eye towards this type of behavior as there are no perceived direct consequences for the everyday construction of their identities.

What these consumer identity struggles show, is how online social experiences also show notions of structure and agency, by simultaneously liberating and constraining users. There is a tension between the participatory, communal nature of social media platforms and commercial structures attempting to dominate it (Kozinets, 2015). As social media platforms provide instant access to stores and products, image driven social media has become the latest form of window shopping. Throughout this contemporary exploration of the digital landscape, I believe it is important to revisit the ideas presented by Fournier and Avery (2011). The advent of social media marketing is one noticeable change since the time this article was published, becoming more profit-based as platforms have embraced and embedded various forms of advertising into the user experience. Instagram in particular has changed significantly, even in the last five years, by integrating different forms of advertising into the social platform. This has caused brands to be more invited and integrated into the social media space, as advertisements are now shared in between users' content, or even seamlessly integrated within user generated content, in the form of influencer marketing. Back in 2011, Fournier and Avery argued that on the "people's web" the power scales are in favor of the consumer and in opposition to the brand. However, new media is now arguably commodified and tied to capitalist interests, privileging "established brands that control significant media resources" (Fuchs, 2014; as cited by Verwey, 2015, p. 321). As a result, I believe that in the time that has passed since Fournier & Avery's work (2011), 'the uninvited brands' have since been more embraced and integrated within the open-source context. This is not without challenges, due to the new identity struggles and contradictions experienced by consumers. Reflecting on Fournier's notion that "consumers choose lives, not brands" it appears that Monki has achieved success in the Web 2.0 marketplace by carving out a space for freedom and liberation, where consumers can exercise their identity needs.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the process of brand- and consumer identity co-construction on visual social media. This was applied to a real-life context by delving into the relationship between fashion brand, Monki, and a group of its consumers. By conducting in-depth interviews, I was able to understand how brand meaning is understood by my participants, and how both Monki, and other brands, are involved in the daily production of their personal and social identities. Additionally, my interviews were complemented by a netnographic analysis of the brand's online behavior in order to better understand how the brand attempts to insert itself into their consumers' identity work. This involved a virtual interview with a Monki brand representative, who helped verify my interpretations by providing me with an inside view into the brand's culture. Ultimately, based off the data yielded by both my interviews and netnographic observations, a thorough analysis was conducted of the performances and experiences of both internal and external stakeholders. It proved necessary to explore both roles in order to understand how these actors come together to co-construct the brand's meaning, as well as the dynamics and implications it entails.

The findings showed that in creating a sense of *sisterhood and solidarity*, Monki is able to connect with their consumers' personal identities through various strategies. It was observed that many interviewees felt strong ties between themselves and Monki, in such a way that the brand has taken on the role of the "other" with whom they can identify. As interviewees seek to verify their identities using fashion brands, they may experience positive or negative emotions depending on whether this verification occurs or not. This was especially apparent when discussing Monki's inclusive size range. The arbitrary structures imposed by the market have come to represent legitimized standards for the female body, and when consumers feel they do not fit into these 'molds' they experience feelings of alienation and rejection. Additionally, this notion of sisterhood and solidarity was further reinforced by matching values and lifestyles between the brand and its consumers. However, viewing these practices through a post-feminist lens helped shed light on particular instances of consumer feminism. Such a perspective might argue that, by incorporating various forms of post-feminist rhetoric into their branding communications, Monki is profiting off feminist themes of empowerment and choice. It remains important to stay critical of such representational changes, as inclusive size ranges and empowering quotes may not be as socially progressive as they appear to be.

Moreover, employing the *creativity of the collective* proved to be another key co-constructive practice between Monki and its consumers. By encouraging brand-driven self-expression, Monki has created an online space where consumers are invited and inspired to share their "style stories" using the #monkistyle hashtag. On the one hand, this satisfies expressive

identity needs by making consumers feel appreciated and recognized for their contributions. This shapes consumers' identities through the ways they express themselves through the clothes and the values they attach to them. On the other hand, the brand has also found a way to leverage the participatory, interactive nature of Instagram by stimulating the production of valuable user-generated content that they can then use for marketing and advertising purposes. While scholars have warned brand managers about the risks of entering the digital sphere, it appears that Monki has been able to somewhat manage their online space with their own hashtag and the implementation of Monki scouts. This demonstrates how the brand not only participates in online conversations, but also actively steers and shapes them. This, in turn, also influences consumers' personal and social identity needs, by enabling connections with like-minded individuals, allowing enough "freedom" to self-organize around the brand.

Lastly, it was found that while market-based choice and new media technologies certainly enable new opportunities for identity construction, new challenges and burdens are brought along with it. By *embodying the digital brandscape*, the results of this research demonstrate how this complex, symbolic environment contains various tensions that both brands and consumers must learn to navigate through. While social media allows for new forms of self-expression and interpersonal connection, it can also lead to fragmented, multiple selves where consumers may experience ambiguity and internal conflict. Likewise, it becomes harder for brands to reach and convince consumers, as they become more skeptical and critical of branded content. While the emergence of new media platforms have certainly shifted business interest to more self-expressive production activities over more traditional means of consumption, some scholars argue that this is simply because technology and social systems evolve together. On the one hand, humans choose, adapt and shape technologies to enhance the way we communicate, entertain, learn and express the self. On the other, as technological systems change, both human and institutional systems are adjusted and shifted (Kozinets, 2015). This was demonstrated through this research, by highlighting how new media technologies have significantly changed our behaviors, lifestyles and practices. Likewise, these developments have also challenged traditional branding paradigms. In acknowledging both humans and technologies as co-constructive agents, this research has shown how new media technologies continuously shape and reshape our bodies, identities, consumption habits and organizations. At the same time, these technologies are constantly adapted to fit our needs. This dynamic between technology and 'human cultures' is a complex, ever-evolving concern as our world continues to be characterized by constant adaptation and change (Kozinets, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are still some limitations within this study that must be acknowledged. The first is regarding its subjectivity. Just as with any qualitative study, the results of this research are based off of personal interpretations by the researcher. In using a grounded theory approach,

coding was used to attach meaning to particular segments of data. However, these codes were *constructed* by giving meaning to particular segments of data over others, using words I chose. These observations could potentially be biased, due to background knowledge or personal experiences unknowingly influencing what pieces of the data stand out over others. One way to combat this is to implement more than one coder, in order to ensure the same interpretations can be made by other researchers.

Additionally, chapter three contained a critical discussion about reflexivity regarding my position as a female researcher in this particular field. On the one hand, feminist scholars would argue for the value of women interviewing other women, by fostering more reciprocity and intimacy between the researcher and participants. Reflecting on this, I do believe that my position allowed access to stories, accounts and perspectives that might otherwise be harder to reach or fully grasp. However, I acknowledge the issue of cultural affinity in that I may be too close to what is happening in the field. While this was encountered with reflexive, self-critical assessments of my role throughout the research process, this is still recognized as a limitation within this study. This also highlights a potential path for further research, by incorporating more perspectives.

As discussed in chapter two, this thesis acknowledges that individuals have multiple selves; meaning people may act differently depending on various contexts and situations. Throughout this research, this perspective of identity was continuously used to observe my interviewees and their consumption behaviors. In doing so, however, the same must be applied to other contexts, including my interviews. It is highly likely that throughout the interview situation, interviewees put forward their *ideal self*, or *ideal social self* when discussing various topics or experiences with me. While many participants seemed honest and comfortable sharing particularly personal stories, there is no way to know whether their accounts are a representation of their “true” or “actual” self (Jamal & Goode, 2001). As qualitative research is about capturing people’s experiences, the way participants frame those experiences could also have unintentionally impacted the results of this study.

Another limitation is regarding generalizability. This study focused on Monki as a case study to explore co-constructive practices on visual social media. While a narrowed focus allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the topic at hand, these findings may not be generalizable to other brands. The same can be said for my sample size, which consists of relatively few interviewees (ten), who are all women. However, by focusing on a fashion brand aimed specifically towards women, this research was also able to bring forth the complex relationship between the female consumer and the fashion industry, one of the most expressive product categories. This was drawn out by shedding light on particular sociocultural constraints, identity needs and internal struggles that female consumers face when drawing upon marketplace resources to construct a coherent

self-narrative. Nonetheless, with regards to my approach, there are many opportunities for future research to expand on my findings in order to see if and how co-constructive practices vary across various fashion brands and even industries. For example, it could be interesting to explore the relationship between male consumers and sports brands. The sports industry has long been considered male dominated, as well as one of the main spaces in which masculine identities are socially constructed and reinforced. Future research could thus look into how male consumers interact with sports brands in order to explore brand- and consumer identity co-construction from a different perspective.

Additionally, in Western culture, we see social boundaries constantly being challenged and becoming more fluid. For instance, many people identify as non-binary, which asserts that there is a spectrum of gender identities rather than being either 'feminine' or 'masculine'. Since fashion is arguably a terrain for gender negotiation, it could be interesting to see how non-binary individuals draw upon marketplace resources to construct their sense of self, considering the majority of the fashion industry is still divided according to traditional gender boundaries. Likewise, there are also many gender-neutral fashion brands and collections on the rise with the aim of changing gender stereotypes. Future research could potentially explore these brands as well, by seeing how these brands still attempt to resonate with their consumers' identity project, and whether they use other identity myths or ideological opportunities to do so.

With regards to managerial implications, a recommendation for marketers and brand managers would be to look into academic studies such as this one when considering joining any online conversations. Even brands who have experience with social media could benefit from the results in this study, as valuable consumer insights, desires and needs are explored that can potentially be applied to other target groups and product categories. Additionally, this research provided an analysis of contemporary, yet innovative branding strategies that leverage the participatory and collaborative features of Web 2.0 platforms. Brands who find themselves still hesitating to join social media can potentially learn from these observations and become inspired to find their own ways to tap into the creativity of the collective. However, this does not imply that the researcher condones the use of potentially harmful or deceitful ideological opportunities in order to resonate with consumer identity projects.

To end on a positive note, in taking a closer look at the construction and negotiation of brand meaning between Monki and its consumers, the results of the present study have exemplified various contemporary practices of brand meaning co-construction currently taking place in the digital brandscape. These practices highlight how fashion brands may be used in the production of consumers identities, as well as the pivotal role visual social media can play in this two-way process.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Topic List and Research Questions

RQ: How are brand- and consumer identities co-constructed on visual social media?

SQ1: How is brand meaning co-created in the production of consumers identities?

SQ2: What role does visual social media play in the process of brand- and consumer identity co-construction?

Introduction

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself?
 - Where are you from?
 - How old are you?
 - What do you like to do?
2. As you know, I came across your profile because you posted a picture on Instagram using the hashtag #MonkiStyle. Can you tell me a little more about why you posted that photo (using those hashtags/caption/mentions)?
 - What was your experience using this hashtag?
 - Did you get any response or interaction afterwards?
3. How would you describe your personal style?
 - How does Monki fit into that?

Brands & Fashion

4. How often do you buy clothes from this brand?
5. Why does the brand appeal to you?
 - What values or qualities come to mind when you think about Monki?
6. What is it about Monki that you like, in comparison to other brands?
 - How do you feel when you wear their clothes?
7. Do you find that it connects to other brands you like?
 - What are those?
8. How are those other brands a part of your everyday life?
 - What does fashion mean to you?
 - How is fashion a part of your everyday life?

9. How would you describe your relationship with the brand?
10. How does it help you express yourself (as a woman)?
 - How do you think the brand connects with who you are?
 - How does the brand empower you? (assumption, only use if they mention it themselves)
 - What elements of the brand connect with you personally?
 - What parts of yourself do you see in the brand?

Consumption choices

11. What influences your fashion choices?
12. Do you find that your style changes from time to time?
 - What makes it change?
13. How often do you buy new clothes?
 - What are some of the reasons why you buy new clothes?
14. How do you feel when you buy something new?
15. How do the things you buy help you express who you are?

Social media

16. How do you understand social media?
17. How is this part of your everyday life?
 - Which social media platforms do you prefer the most and why?
 - How often do you go to social media?
 - How do you use it? Do you share content, post, like, comment, all of the above?
18. How many brands do you follow on social media?
 - Why do you follow them?
 - How do you interact with them?
19. How do you think social media has changed your relationship with these brands?

Appendix B: Code Tree

Selective Code	Axial Code	Exemplary Open Codes
Sisterhood and Solidarity	Strong brand ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I love Monki.” • “If they would stop now, I would cry.” • “Monki is very important to me.” • “My favorite store ever.” • More authentic than other brands • More attentive than other brands
	Combatting alienation from other brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alienation due to body type • Restricted plus size market • Struggling with insecurities • Body shape influencing choices • Inclusive sizing • Feeling recognized
	Matching values and lifestyles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female empowerment • Sharing sustainable efforts • Recognizing oneself • Attracted by similar values • Vegan/vegetarian lifestyle • Mental health connection
Creativity of the Collective	Style as a reflection of the self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformative power of fashion • Form of therapy • Coping mechanism • Fashion as self-expression • Part of ‘me’ • Reflection of moods
	Quest for individuality and authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Condoning the mainstream • Finding own style • Rejecting trends • Being different than others • Praising individuality • Staying authentic
	Enabling freedom and creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows creative self-expression • Authentic designs • Unique clothes • Inspired to try new things • More daring • Eccentric twist
Embodying the Digital Brandscape	Dissociating from brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Branded products don’t make your style.” • “I don’t like a lot of stores or brands.” • The message behind the clothes • Used to follow more brands • Empowered by people, not brands • Influencers more inspiring

	Consumer identity struggles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing shopping habits • Avoiding unethical brands • Cognitive dissonance • Feelings of guilt • Not convinced • Sceptical of authenticity
	Social media as inspiration and self-expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy source of inspiration • Creative outlet • Inspiring others • Platform for self-expression • Get to know brands better • Feeling less alone
	Internal struggles on social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling addicted • Danger to mental health • Time consuming • Limited self-expression • Pressure to create content • Perfect illusions