Scroll, Click, Buy: How Shein's Social Media Marketing Drives Gen-Z Impulse Buying and Overconsumption in Durban North

Arya Gokool *
The Independent of Education,
Emeris, Faculty of Commerce

aryagokool101@gmail.com

* Corresponding author

Shamola Pramjeeth
The Independent of Education,
Emeris, Faculty of Commerce

spramjeeth@emeris.ac.za

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of SHEIN's social media marketing on Generation Z (Gen-Z) consumers' impulse buying and overconsumption in Durban North, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Focusing on digital platforms, it examines how influencer collaborations, haul videos, flash sales and app-based promotions shape purchasing behaviour and perceptions of affordability. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, semi structured interviews were conducted with eight Gen-Z participants (18–22 years) selected via purposive and snowball sampling. The thematic analysis revealed eight themes: Social Media Engagement with SHEIN, Influence of Social Media Content and Influencers, Promotional Strategies and Sales, Impulse Buying Behaviour, Overconsumption and Excess Purchases, Gen-Z Consumer Behaviour, Perceptions of Affordability and Quality and Impact on Local Fashion Markets. Findings indicate that SHEIN's influencer content, promotions and App design encourages frequent impulse purchases and rationalisation of excessive buying through affordability, while local retailers face competitive disadvantages due to limited digital engagement and higher prices. The study contributes to understanding how social media marketing drives impulsive consumption among South African Gen-Z consumers and it offers practical insights into reducing overconsumption and enhancing local fashion retailers' competitiveness through digital and influencer strategies. The study extends impulse buying and social influence explanations by showing how app based promotions and haul culture jointly normalises bulk buying and reduces guilt through affordability rationalisations in a South African context.

Key Words: Gen Z, Impulse Buying, Overconsumption, SHEIN, Social Media Marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital economy has reconfigured the relationship between marketing, media consumption and purchasing behaviour. Online platforms now merge advertising, influencer content and social engagement into continuous streams of persuasive stimuli, disproportionately shaping the consumption patterns of younger generations (Soni, 2024). Within this ecosystem, the fast fashion industry has capitalised on algorithm driven visibility, influencer collaborations and viral content formats to accelerate purchasing cycles and to normalise trend based consumption (Chowdhury et al., 2024).

Among the most disruptive actors in this space is SHEIN, a Chinese online fashion retailer whose global expansion has been driven by ultra-competitive pricing, rapid production cycles and highly targeted digital marketing strategies (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Mochiko, 2024). SHEIN's business model is deeply embedded within social media ecosystems and it leverages influencer endorsements, flash sales, algorithmic recommendations and haul culture to create urgency and to stimulate repeated purchasing (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Budree et al., 2021). These tactics are not incidental marketing tools but are structural mechanisms that sustain high frequency consumption.

Generation Z (Gen-Z), defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Slepian et al., 2024), and Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996 (Pereira, 2025), constitute SHEIN's primary consumer segment. As digital natives, this cohort is highly active on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where fashion content, peer validation and influencer recommendations converge (Williams and Page, 2021). Although Gen-Z consumers often express support for sustainability and ethical consumption, empirical evidence suggests a persistent gap between stated values and purchasing behaviour, particularly when affordability and convenience is prioritised (Moon, 2022; Ntobaki, Tlapana and Matli, 2022). This dissonance is especially visible within fast fashion contexts where low prices and rapid trend cycles reduce resistance to impulse purchasing. In the context of SHEIN, this dissonance is explicitly triggered by the retailer's ultra-competitive pricing and rapid production cycles, which prioritise immediate affordability and trend conformity over ethical transparency and environmental impact. Consequently, SHEIN's digital marketing strategies do not just promote products; they provide the financial and social justifications necessary for consumers to override their ethical preferences in favour of impulse driven overconsumption

In South Africa, SHEIN's growing popularity has reshaped online fashion consumption patterns among Gen-Z consumers (Ntobaki, Tlapana and Matli, 2022). However, its expansion raises broader concerns. Beyond individual purchasing behaviour, the proliferation of low cost imported fashion disrupts local retail ecosystems and places pressure on domestic manufacturers and retailers who struggle to compete on pricing, scale and digital reach (Nimo, 2022; Jain and Jain, 2025). Simultaneously, the intensification of marketing saturation within digital environments has been linked to impulse buying tendencies and overconsumption, particularly within fast fashion sectors (Budree et al., 2021; Wilson, Johnson and Brown, 2024).

Impulse buying is frequently stimulated through time sensitive promotions, influencer persuasion and algorithmically curated product recommendations that compress the cognitive distance between desire and transaction (Chowdhury et al., 2024). When reinforced through repeated exposure such purchasing behaviour may evolve into overconsumption, defined as acquiring goods beyond functional necessity, often resulting in negative environmental, social and psychological consequences.

While consumerism can stimulate economic activity and expand consumer choice, its excessive forms generate sustainability and ethical concerns (Moon, 2022). This is particularly evident in the fast fashion sector, where the pressure for constant novelty often overrides the environmental costs of the rapid production cycle.

Despite growing global scrutiny of Chinese online retailers such as SHEIN, Temu and AliExpress (Mochiko, 2024), limited research has examined how SHEIN's social media marketing specifically shapes impulse buying and overconsumption within South African urban contexts. There is a paucity of qualitative research which explores how Gen-Z consumers interpret and rationalise their engagement with SHEIN's digital marketing strategies in localised settings such as Durban North KwaZulu-Natal (Ntobaki, Tlapana and Matli, 2022).

This study addresses that gap by exploring how SHEIN's social media marketing strategies, including influencer collaborations, promotional campaigns and social media haul content, influence impulse buying behaviour and contribute to overconsumption patterns among Gen-Z consumers in Durban North, which is considered an affluent urban centre in the Durban area of South Africa. By adopting a qualitative approach, the research moves beyond transactional metrics to interrogate the psychological, social and contextual mechanisms through which digital marketing shapes purchasing decisions. In doing so, it contributes to retail scholarship by situating global fast fashion dynamics within a local South African consumer landscape and by critically examining the tension between digital convenience, affordability and responsible consumption.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature highlights the transformative role of social media marketing in shaping fast fashion consumption, particularly among Gen-Z consumers. Global fast fashion retailers such as SHEIN, increasingly rely on digital first strategies which encompass influencer collaborations, algorithmic targeting, flash sales and haul videos to drive engagement, brand loyalty and impulse purchases (Carvalho et al., 2020; Sarda, 2024; Dwivedi et al., 2021). These strategies are particularly potent for Gen-Z, who engage with online trends as an integral part of identity construction and social validation (Chang and Chang, 2023; Pertiwi, Suminar and Ardi, 2022).

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING STRATEGIES IN FAST FASHION

SHEIN's marketing approach leverages immersive, interactive and personalised digital content across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube and it employs trends like #SHEINHaul to foster community engagement (Abdinagoro and Bismo, 2024; Sheikh, 2024). Flash sales and algorithmic recommendations exploit urgency and tailored content delivery, converting engagement into immediate purchases (Lambrecht and Tucker, 2021; Wilson, Johnson and Brown, 2024). Haul videos, in particular, function as emotional triggers and present aspirational lifestyles while embedding discount codes and calls to action to stimulate impulse buying (Andò, 2017; Sollwedel and Bak, 2023). These strategies blur the line between entertainment and advertising, creating environments in which rational decision making is secondary to emotional gratification (Cai and Wohn, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Theoretical grounding in the Social Influence Theory further explains these dynamics and highlights mechanisms of compliance, identification and internalisation that drive Gen-Z consumer behaviour (Kelman, 1958; Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2024). Consumers identify with influencers, comply with social norms and internalise shared brand values, making them particularly susceptible to curated social media marketing (Pertiwi, Suminar and Ardi, 2022). Despite extensive international research, studies contextualising these strategies in South African urban centres,such as Durban North remain limited (Ntobaki, Tlapana and Matli, 2022), indicating a critical gap in understanding localised Gen-Z engagement.

2.2 IMPULSE BUYING AND OVERCONSUMPTION IN FAST FASHION

Impulse buying, defined by Stern (1962) as unplanned and stimulus driven purchasing, is central to SHEIN's platform design. Qu (2024) identifies four types of impulse buying - pure, reminder, suggestion and planned - each reinforced by SHEIN's digital interface and marketing techniques. Pure impulse is triggered by visually appealing layouts and trending product displays, while reminder and suggestion impulses exploit algorithmic recommendations and influencer content to prompt additional purchases. Planned impulses occur when consumers respond to sales incentives such as flash promotions or countdown timers which motivate higher purchase volumes than originally intended (Weber and Ritch, 2023).

The gamification of mobile applications further entrenches impulse behaviour within a "dopamine economy" where daily flash sales, pop up vouchers and interactive discount mechanisms stimulate repeated engagement (Grau, Kleiser and Bright, 2019; Wilson, Johnson and Brown, 2024). Gen-Z consumers are particularly responsive to these features, often purchasing for excitement or social display rather than necessity (Amir, Fatima and Rashid, 2024; Sajeetha-Madhavan and Tay, 2023). Impulse buying is closely linked to overconsumption, contributing to environmental degradation and psychological dissatisfaction as fast fashion encourages frequent wardrobe turnover and trend conformity (Jackson, 2014; Moon, 2022; Qu, 2024).

2.3 INFLUENCE OF CHINESE ONLINE RETAILERS

The rise of Chinese e-commerce platforms, including SHEIN, Temu and AliExpress has disrupted local fashion markets by combining low cost, trend driven offerings with rapid delivery and personalised user experiences (Qu, 2024; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Their expansion into South Africa challenges traditional retailers such as Mr Price and Edgars for example, who struggle with scale, digital sophistication and trend responsiveness (Nimo, 2022). While affordability drives adoption, social perception and aspirational value also shape Gen-Z preferences, as association with global trends enhances social capital (Abdinagoro and Bismo, 2024; Wilson, Johnson and Brown, 2024). These platforms' disruption raises concerns regarding ethical consumption, local industry sustainability and consumer loyalty (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Budree et al., 2021; Jain and Jain, 2025), yet studies that focus on South African youth are scarce.

2.4 CONSUMER PREFERENCES AND THE SUSTAINABILITY PARADOX

Gen-Z consumer preferences reflect a complex interplay of affordability, trend responsiveness, convenience and social influence (Wongsunopparat and Deng, 2021; Qu, 2024). While Chinese retailers emphasise digital aesthetics and peer validation, ethical transparency and labour practices are often overlooked, resulting in a "sustainability paradox" where consumers express concern for the environment but continue frequent purchases of fast fashion (Fraanje and Spaargaren, 2019; Moon, 2022; Jain and Jain, 2025). This tension between stated values and actual behaviour is exacerbated by influencer trust and perceived credibility on social media (Budree et al., 2021) which highlights the complexity of Gen-Z decision making in digital retail spaces.

2.5 GEN-Z CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

As digital natives, Gen-Z consumers perceive social media trends as integral to identity, with purchasing influenced by emotional gratification, trend conformity and aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016; Semwal et al., 2024; Chang and Chang, 2023). Social media engagement facilitates peer visibility and social proof, reinforcing the impact of influencer marketing on brand alignment (Erwin, Saununu and Rukmana, 2023; Ntobaki, Tlapana and Matli, 2022). Kelman's

(1958) framework of social influence captures these dynamics, particularly the processes of compliance and identification, demonstrating that Gen-Z behaviour is often guided by collective norms and digital peer pressures.

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that SHEIN's social media marketing strategies drive impulse buying and overconsumption among Gen-Z consumers by leveraging visual stimuli, influencer relatability, algorithmic targeting and gamified engagement (Wilson, Johnson and Brown, 2024; Stern, 1962; Dwivedi et al., 2021). While international studies provide robust theoretical and empirical evidence, localised research in South Africa remains limited, particularly in urban centres such as Durban North where cultural, economic and digital contexts may moderate these effects (Ntobaki, Tlapana and Matli, 2022). Additionally, the sustainability paradox highlights the ethical tensions inherent in Gen-Z consumption, which raises questions about the efficacy of marketing practices in promoting responsible consumption (Fraanje and Spaargaren, 2019; Moon, 2022). This reinforces Moon's (2022) assertion that, while expanded choice is a benefit of modern consumerism, the 'excessive forms' it takes, such as the high frequency purchasing cycles seen on SHEIN, pose significant ethical challenges. This tension highlights the complexity of Gen-Z decision making, where the desire for responsible consumption is frequently compromised by the immediate gratification of low cost, trend driven digital marketing.

By situating this study within the South African context, the research addresses a crucial gap, providing insights into how global digital strategies interact with local consumer behaviours, values and socio economic realities. Although prior studies document that influencer marketing increases impulse buying, less is known about how consumers rationalise repeated low value purchases as 'saving' in emerging market contexts. This study addresses that gap qualitatively.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This study is anchored in two interrelated theories which provide a robust lens for examining the relationship between social media marketing and Gen-Z consumer behaviour: Hawkins Stern's Impulse Buying Model (1962) and Kelman's Social Influence Theory (1958). Together, they offer complementary insights into the psychological and social drivers underpinning SHEIN's marketing effectiveness in stimulating impulse purchases and overconsumption (Budree et al., 2021).

Hawkins Stern's model posits that consumer decisions are frequently driven by external stimuli rather than rational deliberation, with purchases influenced by promotional messages, visual cues or emotional signals (Stern, 1962). Stern distinguishes four types of impulse buying: pure impulse - driven by immediate emotional desire; reminder impulse - triggered by cues; suggestion impulse - prompted by external recommendations and planned impulse - anticipated purchases influenced by deals or time sensitive offers (Stern, 1962). This framework is particularly relevant to the study because SHEIN's digital marketing, through flash sales, influencer led haul videos, algorithmic recommendations and limited time promotions strategically target these impulsive tendencies (Budree et al., 2021). Gen-Z consumers, as highly engaged digital natives on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, are especially susceptible to these emotional and visual triggers, making the model an effective lens for understanding how SHEIN encourages spontaneous purchasing (Budree et al., 2021). This theoretical perspective directly addresses the first research objective by explaining the mechanisms through which marketing content fosters immediate consumer action.

Complementing this, Kelman's Social Influence Theory (1958) provides a social psychological perspective on consumer behaviour, highlighting how individuals' attitudes and decisions are shaped by social interactions and pressures. Kelman identifies three forms of influence: compliance - the adoption of behaviours to gain approval;

identification - the emulation of admired figures and internalisation - the integration of beliefs aligned with personal values (Kelman, 1958; Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2024). In the context of SHEIN, these processes manifest through influencer endorsements, haul videos and peer trend visibility which create perceived social proof and authenticity, motivating Gen-Z consumers to align their purchases with popular norms (Budree et al., 2021). Consequently, social influence extends beyond mere product selection as it reinforces brand loyalty, trend adherence and identity validation and helps explain why global retailers like SHEIN are preferred over local competitors (Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2024).

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the research problem. Stern's model captures the emotional and behavioural components of impulsive buying while the Social Influence Theory contextualises the social and psychological pressures driving Gen-Z engagement: flash sales/countdown timers (stimulus) primarily trigger planned impulse buying (Stern) via compliance with urgency norms (Kelman), resulting in higher basket size.

By integrating these perspectives, the study can analyse how SHEIN's marketing strategies simultaneously exploit individual impulsivity and social validation mechanisms, ultimately fostering high levels of consumer engagement, impulse purchases and overconsumption. This dual theoretical approach ensures that both the internal drivers and external social pressures influencing Gen-Z behaviour are systematically considered and offers critical insights into the efficacy of digital marketing strategies in the fast fashion industry. Moreover, applying these theories within the socio economic context of Durban North enables the study to examine how global marketing mechanisms intersect with local consumer realities.

This study conceptualises the relationship between SHEIN's social media marketing strategies and consumer behaviour as a multi layered process in which marketing stimuli and social influence mechanisms jointly shape behavioural outcomes among Gen-Z consumers in Durban North.

The conceptual model below proposes that:

- SHEIN's digital marketing strategies act as external stimuli (Stern, 1962)
- These stimuli trigger impulse buying mechanisms
- Simultaneously, social influence processes (Kelman, 1958) reinforce and legitimise purchasing behaviour
- This interaction results in impulse buying behaviour, which cumulatively leads to overconsumption
- Reinforced within the Gen Z digital engagement context.

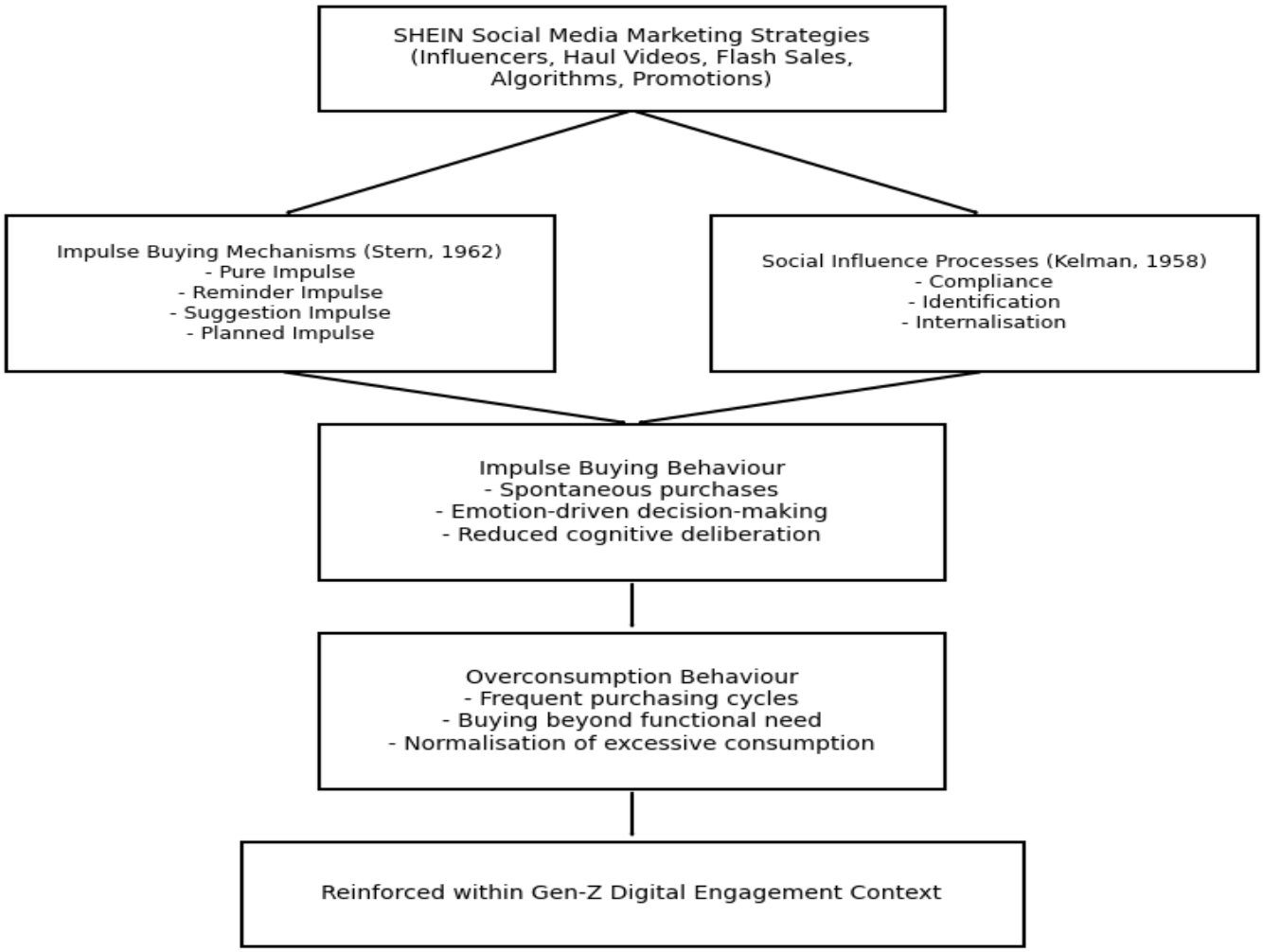


FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL (AUTHORS, 2026)

4. IDENTIFIED GAP

Although international scholarship confirms the persuasive capacity of social media marketing within fast fashion (Wilson, Johnson and Brown, 2024), there remains limited qualitative research that examine how these mechanisms operate within South African urban contexts, particularly among Gen-Z consumers in Durban North (Ntobaki, Tlapana and Matli, 2022). Existing studies document behavioural trends but insufficiently explore how young consumers interpret, justify or resist impulse driven consumption.

By grounding the study in Stern's behavioural framework and Kelman's social processes, this research offers a theoretically robust lens for examining how SHEIN's social media marketing influences impulse buying and overconsumption within a specific localised setting. Existing South African studies largely quantify social media influence on purchase intention but rarely examine (i) app based promotional mechanics, (ii) guilt reduction rationalisations tied to affordability and (iii) perceived competitive implications for local retailers.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gain a deeper understanding of how SHEIN's social media marketing influences impulse buying and overconsumption among Gen-Z consumers, this study followed an interpretivist research paradigm. As there is currently limited research on the impact of global fast fashion marketing on South African Gen-Z consumers, the study was exploratory. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) in accordance with its ethics review procedures (R.000172).

Data was collected through semi structured, face-to-face interviews conducted between 22 July and 5 August 2025 in Durban North. The target population comprised Gen-Z consumers aged 18–26, who actively engaged with SHEIN's social media marketing and who had made independent purchases on the platform. A non-probability sampling methodology, specifically purposive sampling and snowball sampling, was used to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria. Recruitment began with a call for participation on the researcher's social media platforms (Instagram and WhatsApp) resulting in 12 responses. Of these, eight participants met the inclusion criteria and were selected. The sample comprised six females and two males aged between 18 and 22 years. A detailed participant profile is presented as follows:

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Participant Number	Gender	Age
Participant 1	Female	21
Participant 2	Female	21
Participant 3	Female	21
Participant 4	Male	21
Participant 5	Female	18
Participant 6	Male	22
Participant 7	Female	21
Participant 8	Female	21

Five participants were recruited through purposive sampling, while three were obtained through snowball referrals. Participants who were under the age of 18, resided outside Durban North, or who had not previously purchased from SHEIN, were excluded. The seventh interview reached data saturation, as no new themes or insights emerged. However, an additional interview was conducted to confirm consistency and to ensure the depth of the findings.

All interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were guided by a semi structured interview schedule which covered six key areas: participant background, social media engagement, influencer and promotional impact, impulse buying behaviour, overconsumption and local alternatives and reflections. Open ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and motivations, while follow up probes were used to explore emerging insights. Interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time and their confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed. A sample of eight was deemed sufficient given the narrow aim, specific inclusion criteria and rich interview dialogue.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. Transcripts were coded manually and with AI support (ChatGPT) to identify patterns and themes related to SHEIN's marketing strategies, impulse buying and overconsumption. ChatGPT (free access version, GPT-5) was used as an exploratory tool to assist with initial code generation which improved efficiency while it maintained full researcher control. Atlas.ti's AI functionality was not utilised due to accessibility constraints. De-identified transcript excerpts were entered using prompts such as: *"Please help with my thematic analysis for my study. Give me the main themes from this information".* The tool was used via the standard interface (non-temporary chat), with no custom AI agent developed. All AI-generated codes were treated as preliminary and were critically reviewed, refined and validated by the researcher in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. To ensure rigour and to mitigate hallucination, outputs were cross checked against the original transcripts and any unsupported suggestions were discarded. An audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency and replicability.

Thematic coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework which ensured systematic identification, refinement and interpretation of themes. ChatGPT was used primarily during the initial identification phase to generate preliminary theme suggestions from de-identified excerpts. These AI-generated outputs did not constitute final themes but served as a starting point for analysis. The refinement phase was conducted manually by the researcher under the guidance of her supervisor who reviewed, merged and adjusted codes to ensure alignment with the dataset and research objectives. While ChatGPT occasionally suggested theme labels, the interpretation and final definition of themes remained the responsibility of the researcher which ensured that all themes were grounded in participants' original responses and context. Key themes included social media engagement, influencer influence and promotional strategies. The findings were interpreted using Hawkins Stern's Impulse Buying Model (1962) and Kelman's Social Influence Theory (1958) which linked participants' subjective experiences to the psychological and social drivers of consumption.

Ensuring trustworthiness is critical in qualitative research to verify the rigour, accuracy and neutrality of the findings (Ahmed, 2024). This study enhanced trustworthiness through four key criteria: credibility, confirmability, transferability and dependability (Ahmed, 2024). Given the interpretivist paradigm, credibility was prioritised to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences (Ahmed, 2024). Credibility was strengthened through semi-structured interviews and member checking which allowed participants to review their transcribed responses for accuracy (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout, 2021). Data triangulation was also applied by comparing responses across participants and by aligning findings with existing literature and the theoretical frameworks of Hawkins-Stern's Impulse Buying Model and Social Influence Theory (Ahmed, 2024).

Importantly, as AI support (ChatGPT) was used during the coding process, additional steps were taken to preserve credibility. All AI-generated codes and theme suggestions were treated as preliminary and were systematically cross checked against the original transcripts to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' actual responses. This mitigated the risk of AI hallucination or misrepresentation of data.

Confirmability was ensured using a reflexive journal which allowed the researcher to critically reflect on personal biases and to document how interpretations were developed (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout, 2021). An audit trail was maintained to record all decisions made during data analysis, including coding and theme development, particularly when incorporating AI-assisted outputs. This ensured that findings were derived from the data rather than from researcher bias or unverified AI suggestions. Additionally, anonymised verbatim quotes were included to support key themes which enhanced transparency and evidentiary grounding (Ahmed, 2024).

Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research context, including participant demographics, digital behaviours and engagement with SHEIN's marketing (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout, 2021). This will enable readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar Gen-Z populations in other urban contexts. Dependability was ensured through a consistent and well documented research process, from data collection to thematic analysis, allowing for potential replication. The inclusion of AI-assisted coding procedures, alongside manual verification and documentation, further strengthened the transparency and consistency of the research process.

6. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS:

Thematic analysis revealed eight key themes, each of which is explored below. Each theme is illustrated through verbatim participant quotes (coded as Participant 1-8), supported by academic research and is discussed in connection with the theoretical framework. The study included eight participants, six of whom were female and two of whom were male, ages ranging between 18 and 22 years. Most participants (five out of eight) reported being highly active on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Participants' shopping carts averaged between R600 and R3,000 per purchase, indicating various levels of engagement with SHEIN's marketing and affordability driven purchasing patterns.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Theme	Sub-themes	Key Focus
1.Social Media Engagement with SHEIN	Platforms and Discovery; Frequency of Exposure; Marketing Strategies	Examines the role of TikTok, Instagram and YouTube as primary discovery channels and the impact of frequent daily exposure to SHEIN content.
2. Influence of Social Media Content and Influencers	Purchase Decisions Influenced by Influencers; Trust and Authenticity	Explores how influencer demonstrations drive product adoption while highlighting consumer scepticism regarding paid partnerships and authenticity.
3. Promotional Strategies and Sales	Discounts and Flash Sales; Coupons and pp-based Promotions; Normalisation of Sales Culture	Focuses on how app-based coupons and major sales events stimulate increased spending and normalise high frequency, sales driven shopping.
4. Impulse Buying Behaviour	Unplanned Purchases; Emotional Outcomes; App Design as a Trigger	Investigates spontaneous purchasing triggered by low prices and digital architecture, alongside the resulting emotional cycle of excitement and regret.
5. Overconsumption and Excess Purchases	Buying Beyond Intentions; Stockpiling and Waste; Rationalisation of Overconsumption	Analyses patterns of bulk buying and the accumulation of unused items which are often justified through affordability rationalisations.
6. Gen-Z Consumer Behaviour	Digital Native Shopping Habits; Trend Following and Identity; Shopping Prompted by Online Content	Situates SHEIN shopping as a habitual digital routine used for rapid trend following and self-expression.
7. Perceptions of Affordability and Quality	Affordability; Quality; Rationalising Overconsumption	Weighs the primary motivator of low cost against the trade-off of lower product quality which is often accepted as part of the value proposition.
8. Perceived Impact on Local Fashion Markets	Preference for SHEIN; Weaknesses of Local Brands; Opportunities for Local Brands	Highlights the competitive gap in digital agility between SHEIN and local retailers while identifying opportunities for local brands to use influencer marketing.

6.1 THEME 1: SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT WITH SHEIN:

This theme illustrates how SHEIN leverages social media platforms to maintain visibility among Gen-Z consumers showing that Instagram, TikTok, X and YouTube function as both discovery and engagement channels. Daily exposure to content combined with influencer marketing generates both interest and ambivalence toward SHEIN's advertisements.

6.1.1 Platforms and Discovery:

Seven participants reported discovering SHEIN through social media which highlighted its role as a primary source of brand awareness. Participant 1 noted: "I learnt about it through social media" while Participant 7 added: "I watch a lot of YouTube try on haul videos because I like to visualise what I'm going to buy" and Participant 5 reflected: "Mostly TikTok… I see new stuff every day and it catches my attention". In contrast, one participant discovered SHEIN via word-of-mouth, stating: "A friend recommended it; I wasn't really on social media much then" indicating that, while social media dominates, personal networks can still influence discovery.

6.1.2 Frequency of Exposure:

High frequency exposure emerged as a key factor, with six participants reporting daily encounters with SHEIN content. Participant 2 explained: "On Instagram, maybe two to three times a day, if not more" and Participant 7 added: "Almost every day". Despite the repeated exposure increasing familiarity, some participants expressed ambivalence. Participant 6 noted: "Sometimes I'm just a bit frustrated by how often I see it" while Participant 8 reflected: "I like seeing the deals, but sometimes I scroll past because it's too much" which highlighted the fine balance between engagement and saturation.

6.1.3 Marketing Strategies:

Influencer content and try on videos strongly guided engagement and browsing behaviours. Participant 1 shared: "I normally engage with try on hauls on TikTok from influencers and random people" with Participant 7 echoing: "I watch a lot of YouTube try-on haul videos" and Participant 5 adding: "I follow some Instagram creators who do weekly SHEIN hauls - it's easier to decide what to buy". Clicking on advertisements typically prompted browsing rather than immediate purchase. Participant 2 explained: "It didn't prompt me to buy, but it did make me check their app" and Participant 1 added: "I click on Black Friday ads just to see what's on sale". Emotional reactions varied across participants, with Participant 5 stating: "I feel driven to purchase from SHEIN" while Participant 6 remarked: "Sometimes I'm annoyed because it pops up everywhere". Overall, the findings underscore social media's dual effect: it sustains attention and interest while occasionally provoking fatigue.

6.2 THEME 2: INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT AND INFLUENCERS:

This theme explores how visual content and influencers drive purchasing decisions while simultaneously triggering scepticism about authenticity, illustrating the tension between trust and persuasion.

6.2.1 Purchase Decisions Influenced by Influencers:

Six participants confirmed that influencer content directly influenced their purchases. Participant 2 explained: "It was the SheGlam blush… very much to what the post was saying", while Participant 4 added: "I saw a black coat on TikTok, and it looked very nice… so I went on SHEIN and purchased it" and Participant 5 reflected: "I've seen a lot of SheGlam makeup hauls, so I bought some blushes because they looked really good on TikTok". These examples show that visual demonstrations by influencers catalyse product adoption by reducing uncertainty and presenting tangible use cases.

6.2.2 Trust and Authenticity:

Despite the influence of content, participants expressed mixed perceptions regarding credibility. Participant 7 stated: "I don't necessarily trust them because… the paid partnerships hinder their authenticity" while Participant 4 noted: "I didn't trust them very much at first because it was a paid promotion". Conversely, Participant 3 felt reassured by product demonstrations, saying: "I trust them more if they try on the product, so you can see how it looks on them" with Participant 5 adding: "If they show how the clothes move and fit, it feels more genuine". This tension highlights how perceived authenticity moderates the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

6.3 THEME 3: PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES AND SALES

This theme highlights SHEIN's strategic use of discounts, flash sales, coupons and app-based promotions to stimulate purchases, reinforce habitual engagement and normalise sales driven consumer behaviour.

6.3.1 Discounts and Flash Sales:

Seven participants emphasised the influence of sales events. Participant 1 said: "I purchase things during Black Friday sales because it's a great deal" while Participant 3 explained: "I usually wait for their promo codes… they usually have like 40% off" and Participant 6 added: "When I click on the app and they give me coupons, I tend to purchase more". In contrast, Participant 8 reported limited influence and stated: "No, it doesn't influence me because I always have discounts in there from coupons" which showed that promotional effects vary across users.

6.3.2 Coupons and App-Based Promotions:

Coupons and in-app promotions encouraged additional spending, as Participant 4 shared: "When I click on the app and they give me coupons, I purchase more" while Participant 2 noted: "They give me coupons, and I tend to buy more than I planned" and Participant 5 remarked: "I always look for discount codes first… but it also makes me buy extra things".

6.3.3 Normalisation of Sales Culture:

For some participants discounts have become a routine aspect of shopping. Participant 7 reflected: "I always have discounts in there from like coupons, so it just feels like part of the shopping process now" and Participant 8 added: "They set the prices so low and then add deals and bundles. It feels like you're saving money even though you're buying more". Collectively, these quotes show how sales culture is embedded in Gen-Z shopping habits, shaping expectations and behaviours.

6.4 THEME 4: IMPULSE BUYING BEHAVIOUR

This theme demonstrates how SHEIN's marketing and app design promotes spontaneous purchases which reveal the emotional interplay of excitement, gratification and occasional regret.

6.4.1 Unplanned Purchases:

Seven participants acknowledged impulsive behaviour. Participant 1 stated: "Most of the time, it's an impulse" while Participant 8 added: "I planned to buy one phone case, but I ended up buying five extra ones simply because the price was low" and Participant 4 explained: "I purchased multiple chains and pendants…it broadened my horizon regarding accessories".

6.4.2 Emotional Outcomes:

Impulse buying elicited a mix of positive and negative emotions. Participant 3 said: "I felt good. I was excited to see the product in person" while Participant 5 added: "I felt happy when I got my order because it was something different from my usual style". However, regret also emerged with Participant 1 noting: "I feel like I wasted money" and Participant 7 stating: "Sometimes I regret buying because I don't end up using the stuff I bought".

6.4.3 App Design as a Trigger:

SHEIN's digital architecture further facilitated impulsivity. Participant 5 reflected: "Sometimes those options come below when you want to check out, which makes me want to add more to my cart" while Participant 2 remarked: "When I go onto the App, I don't always mean to buy, but the recommendations make me want to".

6.5 THEME 5: OVERCONSUMPTION AND EXCESS PURCHASES

This theme illustrates how low prices, bundling, and app-driven incentives encourage bulk buying among Gen-Z consumers, often resulting in underutilised products and normalising overconsumption.

6.5.1 Buying Beyond Intentions:

Participants frequently purchased more than intended. Participant 8 stated: "I was intending to buy one phone case, and I ended up buying five extra ones just because the price was low" which aligns with Participant 4's reflection: "I bought three pairs of earrings when I was only looking for one… It's because they were bundled at a low price". Participant 2 similarly admitted: "I don't always mean to buy, but once I start browsing, I add things I didn't think I needed". These accounts illustrate a recurring pattern of purchases beyond initial intentions, often triggered by affordability and bundle deals.

6.5.2 Stockpiling and Waste:

Overconsumption led to accumulation and underuse. Participant 7 noted: "Sometimes I regret buying because I don't end up using the stuff I bought" while Participant 5 added: "I have a few items still in my cupboard with the tags on, because I didn't really need them in the first place". Participant 6 reinforced this pattern: "I don't even use some of the things I buy, but I still end up getting more when I see deals". These reflections suggest that digital promotions drive stockpiling, with participants acknowledging both behavioural excess and waste. These behaviours are the literal manifestation of the "excessive forms" of consumerism that Moon (2022) warns about.

6.5.3 Rationalisation of Overconsumption:

Low prices help participants justify excess buying. Participant 1 explained: "It's so cheap that it doesn't feel like you're overspending" and Participant 3 added: "I can buy five things for the price of one and it feels like I'm saving, even if I don't need them". Participant 2 similarly rationalised: "I don't feel guilty because I didn't spend a lot". Collectively, these rationalisations reveal how affordability mediates guilt and normalises overconsumption.

6.6 THEME 6: GEN-Z CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

This theme situates SHEIN shopping within broader Gen-Z consumption patterns, highlighting digital native habits, trend following for identity expression and responsiveness to online content, demonstrating how technology, affordability and trends converge to shape habitual shopping behaviours.

6.6.1 Digital Native Shopping Habits:

Participants emphasised convenience and habitual engagement with online shopping. Participant 2 noted: "I prefer shopping on the SHEIN app because it's easy and I know I'll find something" while Participant 5 stated: "I don't go into stores as much anymore; online is just easier and faster". Participant 7 added: "I check SHEIN whenever I'm bored, even if I don't plan to buy anything" highlighting the integration of digital platforms into everyday routines.

6.6.2 Trend Following and Identity:

Fashion trends and self-expression motivated purchases. Participant 8 said: "I like SHEIN because I can get trendy pieces without spending too much" echoed by Participant 1: "It's easier to keep up with fashion this way; if it's not in style next month, I don't feel bad". Participant 3 reflected: "I like to experiment with my style, and SHEIN makes that possible because it's cheap". These quotes indicate that for Gen-Z affordability facilitates experimentation, risk taking and identity formation.

6.6.3 Shopping Prompted by Online Content:

Online content drives discovery and curiosity. Participant 4 shared: "I bought a coat after seeing it on TikTok; it looked really good there" while Participant 6 remarked: "When I see the ads frequently, I want to see what's new". Participant 7 similarly noted: "The haul videos make me curious, so I check the app even if I don't buy". This reflects a consistent pattern in which digital exposure functions as a cue for browsing, often translating into purchase decisions.

6.7 THEME 7: PERCEPTIONS OF AFFORDABILITY AND QUALITY

This theme examines how participants weigh SHEIN's pricing against perceived product quality, revealing that affordability motivates purchases while lower quality is often accepted as part of the fast fashion value proposition.

6.7.1 Affordability:

Participants consistently highlighted cost as a driving factor. Participant 1 reflected: "It's so cheap that it doesn't feel like you're overspending" while Participant 5 added: "I wouldn't buy as much if it were expensive, but because it's affordable, I get more things". Participant 8 confirmed: "It's nice to be able to try new trends without worrying about the price". Affordability thus reduces barriers to purchase and encourages experimentation.

6.7.2 Quality:

Perceptions of quality were mixed, demonstrating a nuanced view. Participant 4 noted: "Some of the clothes are good, but others don't last very long" while Participant 6 added: "Sometimes the sizing is off or the material feels cheap". Participant 8 commented similarly: "The quality isn't always the best, but for the price, it's expected". These reflections show that while price drives purchases, quality considerations temper expectations.

6.7.3 Rationalising Overconsumption:

Participants reconciled low quality with low prices to justify purchases. Participant 2 stated: "Even if something doesn't last long, I don't mind because I didn't spend much on it," while Participant 5 added: "It's not luxury quality, but for the price, it's worth it". Participant 7 summarised: "You get what you pay for, and I'm okay with that". The quotes collectively highlight that affordability not only motivates buying but that it also legitimises overconsumption despite quality trade-offs. Participants' ability to "reconcile low quality with low prices" is the mechanism that allows them to

bypass the ethical and sustainability concerns they might otherwise hold, effectively resolving the sustainability paradox through price based justification.

6.8 THEME 8: PERCEIVED IMPACT ON LOCAL FASHION MARKETS

This theme addresses SHEIN's competitive implications for local fashion retailers, showing how affordability, variety and social media engagement shift consumer preference while also revealing opportunities for local brands to leverage digital strategies.

6.8.1 Preference for SHEIN:

Participants expressed a clear preference for SHEIN based on price and selection. Participant 1 explained: "Local stores are too expensive for what they offer when compared to SHEIN" with Participant 4 adding: "SHEIN has everything in one place, but local shops are limited" and Participant 6 reflected: "I feel like SHEIN updates its styles faster than local businesses can".

6.8.2 Weaknesses of Local Brands:

Participants noted digital shortcomings of local retailers. Participant 2 said: "I don't really see local stores advertise on TikTok or Instagram" while Participant 7 added: "They don't use influencers as much, so young people don't even notice them". Participant 5 observed: "The local stores I know don't have proper websites or apps; it's harder to shop with them". These insights suggest that poor digital presence limits competitiveness among local fashion businesses.

6.8.3 Opportunities for Local Brands:

Participants also suggested actionable strategies. Participant 3 said: "If local brands did more Instagram and TikTok promotions, I'd probably shop there more" while Participant 8 added: "They should use influencers like SHEIN does, especially people we can relate to". Participant 6 noted: "Local brands should highlight their quality because SHEIN's quality isn't always good" and Participant 5 concluded: "If they made it clear that their clothes last longer, I'd be willing to spend more". These reflections indicate that digital engagement, influencer marketing and quality differentiation could help local retailers regain competitiveness.

7. ALIGNMENT WITH THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE

The findings converge with the Hawkins-Stern Impulse Buying Model, where external triggers - app recommendations, flash sales, coupons and influencer content - stimulate spontaneous purchasing behaviour (Agarwal and Chetty, 2019). Participants' impulse purchases, emotional gratification and subsequent regret reflect the cyclical hedonic patterns identified in the literature (Haq and Abbasi, 2016; Zhang, Fan and Zhang, 2023).

Social Influence Theory (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004) is also strongly supported. Influencers act as both informational cues, demonstrating product utility and normative cues, signalling socially endorsed trends. Participants' scepticism regarding paid partnerships illustrates the tension between authenticity and commercial intent (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry Moulard, 2020; Gubalane and Ha, 2023).

The study also supports literature on fast fashion consumer rationalisation. Affordability mitigated concerns about quality, encouraged overconsumption and normalised stockpiling consistent with Armstrong et al.'s (2015) low cost justification effect and(2012) critique of disposable fashion culture. Participants' reliance on social media for product

discovery, trend engagement and identity expression aligns with Gen-Z consumption patterns in digital native contexts (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Domínguez, Zambrano and Rodríguez, 2023; Priporas, Stylos and Fotiadis, 2017).

Finally, findings indicate a market displacement effect of Chinese online retailers like SHEIN on local fashion markets, consistent with prior work (Qu, 2024; Joy, 2012). Local brands were perceived as less digitally agile, while participants suggested that digital engagement and quality differentiation could restore competitiveness (Porter, 2008; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Overall, the findings integrate individual behaviours, digital media influence, fast fashion marketing strategies and macro market implications which demonstrate the interplay of social influence, impulse buying and value rationalisation in Gen-Z's online consumption.

8. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Competitiveness does not require replicating the high frequency, high volume strategies of global fast fashion platforms. Instead, the study findings suggest that local retailers can achieve differentiation by retaining digital sophistication (influencers, algorithms, social media presence) while strategically reframing consumption norms.

This dual approach will allow local brands to remain relevant to Gen-Z consumers while actively addressing the behavioural drivers of impulse buying and overconsumption identified in the study. The study puts forth the following recommendations:

8.1. REPOSITION INFLUENCER MARKETING TOWARD AUTHENTICITY AND LOCAL IDENTITY:

Local retailers should adopt micro and nano influencer strategies that emphasise relatability, authenticity and community alignment rather than aspirational excess. The study shows that Gen-Z consumers respond strongly to influencer identification and perceived authenticity. However, unlike global shopping platforms like SHEIN which promote volume purchasing through haul culture, local brands can differentiate by:

- Partnering with influencers who promote repeat styling, outfit re-use and wardrobe longevity
- Showcasing local culture, identity and context specific fashion narratives and
- Encouraging value based consumption messaging rather than trend saturation.

From a theoretical standpoint, this leverages identification (Kelman, 1958) but redirects it toward responsible consumption norms, thereby maintaining influence while moderating overconsumption.

8.2. REDESIGN DIGITAL PROMOTIONS TO REDUCE IMPULSE TRIGGERS:

The study highlights how flash sales, countdown timers and discount cues activate planned and suggested impulse buying. Local retailers should remain competitive but strategically moderate urgency based tactics by:

- Replacing constant flash sales with scheduled, transparent promotions
- Limiting excessive countdown mechanisms that create artificial urgency and
- Introducing "consideration prompts" (e.g., reminders of product use, quality or longevity before checkout).

This approach preserves promotional competitiveness while reducing stimulus intensity, thereby weakening the automatic impulse response cycle identified in Stern's model.

8.3. LEVERAGE ALGORITHMIC AND PERSONALISED MARKETING FOR VALUE, NOT VOLUME:

While global retailers use algorithmic targeting to reinforce repeated purchasing, local retailers can adopt similar tools but shift the objective from frequency to relevance and sustainability:

- Recommend complementary items for existing purchases rather than promoting continuous new buying
- Highlight capsule wardrobe options or mix-and-match versatility and
- Use personalised messaging to reinforce quality and durability over quantity.

This reframes suggestion impulse triggers into considered consumption cues, maintaining engagement without encouraging excessive purchasing cycles.

8.4. COUNTER "HAUL CULTURE" WITH RESPONSIBLE CONTENT STRATEGIES:

Haul videos and bulk purchasing displays are identified as key drivers of impulse buying and overconsumption. Local retailers should actively counter this haul culture by:

- Promoting "styled looks" using fewer items instead of large volume hauls
- Encouraging influencers to create content around "how to wear one item multiple ways" and
- Highlighting cost-per-wear and long term value.

This disrupts the normalisation of overconsumption and aligns with addressing the sustainability paradox (Fraanje and Spaargaren, 2019) where consumers' values and behaviour is often misaligned.

8.5. BUILD DIGITAL COMMUNITIES THAT REWARD CONSCIOUS CONSUMPTION:

The study shows that Gen-Z purchasing behaviour is strongly shaped by social validation and peer influence. Local retailers can leverage this by:

- Creating online communities that reward mindful purchasing behaviours
- Encouraging user generated content that reflects sustainable fashion practices and
- Positioning responsible consumption as socially desirable and identity enhancing.

By shifting what is socially rewarded, retailers can influence compliance and internalisation processes (Kelman, 1958) and transform responsible consumption into a normative behaviour rather than a constraint.

9. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that SHEIN's social media marketing significantly influences Gen-Z consumers in Durban North and that it drives impulse buying and overconsumption behaviours. Affordability, trend variety and App convenience emerged as primary motivators, while influencer driven content and promotional strategies further amplified purchase intentions. Participants highlighted the disadvantages faced by local fashion retailers, including weak digital presence, limited influencer engagement and suboptimal online platforms which suggests that local businesses could enhance competitiveness through stronger social media strategies, influencer partnerships and through emphasising quality and sustainability. These behaviours are reinforced through continuous digital engagement and social validation, resulting in patterns of overconsumption which include frequent purchasing cycles and buying beyond functional need. The study further highlights that these behaviours are socially embedded, with influencer culture and peer dynamics playing a critical role in normalising excessive consumption.

The findings confirm the research problem by illustrating both consumer and market level implications: Gen-Z's digital native habits and constant exposure to online marketing exacerbate unsustainable consumption, while local retailers struggle to compete with global fast fashion platforms.

The key theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that impulse buying and overconsumption are not discrete outcomes but part of a continuous, socially reinforced behavioural process. By integrating stimulus driven and social influence perspectives, the study shows how marketing triggers and social validation mechanisms operate simultaneously to sustain consumption patterns over time. This moves beyond viewing impulse buying as a momentary reaction and instead conceptualises it as a recurrent behaviour embedded within digital and social ecosystems.

Additionally, the study provides context specific insight into how global fast fashion strategies influence consumer behaviour within a South African setting and it highlights the interaction between digital exposure, affordability and social identity. Overall, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary marketing environments shape not only purchasing decisions but longer term consumption behaviours.

10. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations include the small, geographically restricted sample (n=8, predominantly female, aged 18–22), reliance on self-reported data, and focuses solely on SHEIN and online behaviours, which restrict generalisability and comparative analysis. Future research should examine larger, more diverse populations across South Africa, include multiple fast fashion brands, incorporate longitudinal designs or App based behavioural tracking and explore sustainability awareness and ethical consumption among Gen-Z. Future studies could triangulate consumer accounts with retailer interviews and social media content analysis to assess whether perceived competitive disadvantages translate into measurable market outcomes.

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