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Self-brand Connection in the Digital Age: A Qualitative Exploration of Brand Usage on Instagram for Identity Creation Among Millennials

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Abstract

The distinction between the real and the virtual world has become increasingly complex in recent years, especially with the emergence of social media blurring those transitions. The use of social media platforms such as Instagram, which primarily operates with visual language, helps in selective presentation of the Self to the outside world. This exploratory study investigates the formation of an ideal Self on Instagram among millennials. Based on the Instagram profile analysis and ten semi-structured interviews, findings demonstrate that millennials are expressing their identity through brand preference yet exhibit low brand-loyalty. These findings, combined with existing research on the formation of (digital) identity associated with brand usage, suggest that millennials identify with the brands they follow on Instagram but do not extend it, as assumed, to present an ideal version of themselves to the outside world.

Keywords: *Social Media; Millennials; Self-Brand Connection, Identity, Instagram*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today we live through a unique period of the history of mankind, characterized by continuous information flow. The ubiquitous introduction of information technology into our daily lives has altered the way we interact, work, purchase, communicate, and socialize. Digital technologies surround humans to such an extent that digital communication has become imperceptible from different means of communication such as face-to-face, traditional analogue, and print media. The tools of digital connectivity are continuously around us: from the laptop to the smartphone, from the connected fitness device to the smartwatch, we are always online and use these devices as part of all our daily interactions (Cover, 2016).

In fact, this results in an implicit change in the formation of personal identity (Aiken, 2016). Nowadays identity is always online even if we are not close to a digital communication medium. Social networking sites, blogs and other websites that are always online, play an active role in contributing to the elements of our identity, with our footprints left all over the Internet. In a sense, one is always online and one's identities are 'always on'. Therefore, identity and its portrayal on the Internet is not something to be switched off, disconnected or otherwise differentiated from the daily activities of the Self (Cover, 2016).

Individuals tend to use products and brands for creating and portraying idealized identities as well as presenting them to the public. Brands act as symbols of individual achievement, impart self-confidence, differentiate oneself, as well as assisting people to overcome life transitions (Ruvio & Belk, 2013). This exploratory study aims to examine the creation of an ideal Self through the consumption of particular brands on Instagram among

millennials. The research question for this study is: *what is the role of brands in the identity creation by millennials on Instagram?*. Remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review focusing on the creation of digital identity and explores the role of brands in identity construction. Section 3 outline the research methodology used in this study. Thereafter, section 4 discusses the findings related to identity construction and self-brand connection on Instagram. This is followed by a short discussion on the results in light of existing literature. Finally, last section concludes the paper by noting limitations, implications, and future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Self-identity in the digital world

The concept of identity is a subject of considerable interest in the modern social sciences. Research indicates that self-identity may be a cognitive construct of an individual's Self, answering the question "Who am I?" (Pan et al., 2017; Vignoles et al., 2011). The focus of the concept of self-identity emphasizes the attributes of the individual that differentiate it from others. Previous studies on social self-identity note that it is associated with a multitude of emotional, motivational, cognitive, and social processes (Cross et al., 2009). Culturally accepted traits, values, and standards are chosen by individuals to define themselves as independent beings (Stets & Burke, 2009; Meijers, 1998). It may be noted here that self-identity is different from self-concept. Self-concept may be defined as a person's perception of oneself (Shavelson et al., 1976). In contrast, individuals develop multiple identities throughout their lives. The various identities are hierarchically ordered, whereby those more important to the Self are given greater prominence and have higher potential for influencing behavior compared to minor identities. For instance, for a researcher, their academic identity may be more important than their religious or national identity. Previous research demonstrates that a central aspect of identity construction is the active utilization of different identities by individuals in changing situations (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; McCall & Simmons, 1978).

The emergence of digital media is enabling individuals to express themselves in entirely novel ways (Belk, 2013) that such as communicating, purchasing, dating, learning, or gaming. Due to the multitude of possibilities of self-expression offered online, individuals present themselves more self-confidently to others in the virtual world and thus influence their own self-image through their digital productions and activities. Apps like WhatsApp or Instagram give users the opportunity to be in constant contact with others. Posting and sending photos, writing comments or liking photos is intended to remind other people that we exist, have an interesting life, and are part of a connected network as well as an active member of society (Carter & Grover, 2015; Belk, 2016).

Moreover, considering identity as a performative act (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Goffmann, 1959), it may be argued that identities and daily online communication are connected and cooperative. This contrasts with a more elementary concept of fixed identity that is expressed through, but independent of, online activities. Therefore, in regard to social networking and other online platforms, the performative manifestation of

selfhood refers to the way in which online behaviors such as messaging, updating, posting photos and videos function as conscious and/or unintentional forms of expression (Cover, 2016), varying according to intention and context.

Markos et al. (2018) note that the self-image is multifaceted, and consumers possess both a public and a private Self in the digital world. The public Self characterizes self-consciousness from the perceived perspective of others and displays information that is generally visible to the public. Conversely, the private Self embodies the inner conditions, the individual history and specific features of the self as well as consumer behaviors. If this concept is transferred to the online world, the public Self contains information that refers to a social media profile or a selfie and is openly displayed online on Instagram. Considering the public-private-self distinction, they suggest that articles of status such as the car brand or vacation images, symbolizing the public Self, are usually published openly in order to impress or maintain a certain public image. In contrast, private information such as social security numbers or medication is not shared with a large audience and often not displayed at all (Belk, 2013).

2.2. Role of brands in curing identity

Belk (2013) observes that possessions can serve to express psychological needs such as the active creation of the self-concept, the strengthening, and introduction of self-identity, as well as to differentiate the Self from others. Brands may serve as a tool (Strizhakova et al., 2011) for consumers to express different facets of their Self. They may act as a symbol for personal achievement, to convey self-esteem, to enable differentiation and individuality, or to help individuals navigate life transitions. Furthermore, consumers may use brands to express either their actual or ideal self-image (Aaker, 1999; Ekinci et al., 2013). While consumers are guided by a self-verification motive to express their actual Self, they are driven by a self-improvement motive to express their ideal Self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). For instance, if a consumer regards herself as a socially responsible person, she would consider buying organic body shop products helping her to reflect on her actual self-concept (i.e. societal responsibility). Conversely, this same consumer might buy Prada products in order to enhance her ideal self-image, which can arise from a fashionable viewpoint (Japutra et al., 2019).

Kressmann et al. (2006) suggest that individuals favor brands that represent values and personality traits that are aligned with their self-image. This leads to a certain degree of self-brand connection. Self-brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) is the extent to which a brand contributes to an individual's identity, values, and aspirations and results in a longing to express individuality through brands. Self-brand connection is beneficial for companies since that the congruence between brand image and self-image is positively related to product evaluation (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012), brand attachment and brand loyalty (Lee & Workman, 2014). Lee and Workman (2014) argue further that brands have an important significance for the definition of the Self, as an individual's perception regarding self-worth may be transformed or even enhanced by meaningful relationships with a brand.

Being grown-up in a digital society, millennials expect companies to maintain a personal relationship as well as to have an equal exchange with them (Bolton et al., 2013). The definition of the Self with this cohort not only takes place through the purchase of certain brands but also through the presentation of these brands to the public as well as following certain brands on social networks. These networks make it possible for millennials to communicate with their own existing or desired social environment (Correa et al., 2010). While we know that millennials are connected online, very little is known about how they use the brands to create an identity through within their social networks. Hence, the objective of this study is to explore self-brand connection among millennials and how they use it to curate their identities on a social media such as Instagram.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data collection

For the present research, a purposive sampling method was applied. Also known as judgment sampling, this method is a form of nonprobability or non-random sampling which involves members of the target population fulfilling specific criteria. In purposive sampling, participants are chosen according to the study purpose under the expectation that each individual contributor to the study delivers unique and valuable information. The homogeneous population of participants for this study consisted of members of the European millennial age group that use the social media platform Instagram on everyday basis and follow various brands. Selected participants share similar attributes that deepen the knowledge and allow for small differences to be identified more clearly (Saunders et al., 2016). Several factors determined the number of interviews selected: ease of access, geographical proximity, availability at a given time or the willingness to participate for the purposes of the study (Etikan et al., 2016).

A semi-structured interview method was used for data collection purposes. Such qualitative research interviews (Saunders et al., 2009) provide the researcher an opportunity to probe responses and ask participants to explain or build on their responses. Semi-structured interviews have proven to be a successful data collection method due to their versatility and flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016). A significant advantage offered by this interview method is the reciprocity between the researcher and the interviewee (Galletta, 2012). In addition, it allows the interviewer to adapt to the participant's individual answers and to ask appropriate follow-up questions, resulting in a certain improvisation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Furthermore, participants are given the freedom to express themselves freely and individually.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the millennial age group with an active account on Instagram, and who are interacting with the platform on everyday basis and following brands. Furthermore, the selection of participants for the interviews was based on an assessment of their Instagram profiles. An evaluation of each Instagram profile was conducted before selecting the participant to be interviewed. The most relevant demographic data for each participant is outlined in Table 1. Brand follow ratio was calculated as the number of brands they followed divided by the total number of accounts they followed.

ID	GENDER	AGE	BRAND FOLLOW RATIO
P1	M	23	5.8%
P2	F	23	7.52%
P3	M	24	4.9%
P4	M	25	3.08%
P5	F	24	6.82%
P6	M	27	16.46%
P7	M	22	4.9%
P8	F	23	12.50%
P9	F	28	9.04%
P10	F	26	10.10%

Table 1 – Relevant demography of participants

Before the interview, a set of questions was defined and formulated, covering the main topics of the study. The intention was to collect similar information from each participant and to provide the guidance to participants on what to speak about. The interviews began with basic, more general questions about how the participants would describe themselves, moving on to what brands they follow on Instagram and why they like them. Eventually, the questions shifted to deeper questions about their online activities and offline buying behavior. A list of generally asked questions in included in Appendix 1.

3.2. Data analysis

During the process of data analysis, a transition from raw interviews to evidence-based interpretations occurred. Classification, comparison, weighing, and combination of material from interviews were used to extract meaning and implications, reveal patterns, or combine descriptions of events into a coherent narrative (Miles et al., 2014). Sufficient time was permitted in between the interviews in order to study them thoroughly and ensuring that each interview made sense and addressed important topics. The transcription of the interview was immediately completed after each interview. A summary of the interview content was written once the transcription was done. It included a pseudonym for the participant, the time and location of the interview and the reasons why the interviewee was selected for the study. Finally, the summary contained the most important topics that were discussed during the interview, addressing the research question as well as the topics that were discovered.

Transcription and content analysis helped in developing an understanding of the information gathered and in comprehending what was learnt and what remained to be discovered (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The information collected was saved with discreet file names to ensure participants' anonymity. Subsequently, building on ongoing analysis, the key questions were modified and follow up questions were prepared to address any questions that arose.

In-text manual coding was used to conduct a thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Coding includes the systematic identification of topics, concepts, or thematic markers allowing easy retrieval and analysis of all data units related to the same topic across interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A continuous comparison between the codes was carried out during this process with the aim of ensuring that all existing codes remained consistent with the new codes created in subsequent transcriptions (Saunders et al., 2016). For thematic consistency, a list of codes and color markings was carried out (see Figure 1), which allowed the creation of a visible coding structure. Following the physical coding of the interviews (see Appendix 2 for representative quotations associated with each color code), data sorting was performed by merging all data units with the same code into a single computer file. This allowed for the identification of the superordinate understanding of a concept along with the search for nuances, subtle differences in how the concept was perceived but also for systematic similarities (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Based on the analysis two broad themes were identified. The next section discusses these two themes.

Self-image	Give-off image	Inspiration	Information
Brand Authenticity	Following behaviour	Unfollowing behaviour	Connection to brands
Purchasing behaviour	Brand loyalty	Instagram Feed	Group belonging

Figure 1 – Codes and color marking

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Identity construction through Instagram

Identity was an important theme among the participants. During interviews, the participants described their personality, and how they would describe themselves as a person. Their self-description was based on a generally positive description of their personal character. All interviewees, except for one participant who stated that they had an arrogant effect on other people, used positive attributes that showed a certain similarity. Social competence, open-mindedness, curiosity, and happiness were common elements in their self-description. Most participants agreed that they were people with whom it was fun to go, as they were energetic, motivated and active. They also argued that they cared about others and were persons with whom one could talk comfortably.

However, the notion of projected image was considered crucial in the identity construction by the participants. The participants were concerned less with how they saw themselves as individuals, but more with the image they presented to external audience. Apart from their personal identity, most participants described a second, more public identity displayed on Instagram. In this context, the participants described how they would like to be seen or described by the world around them. As the following quotes suggest, the participants also admitted that this 'public' identity may not exactly correspond to their 'private' identity:

> "I would like for people to see me as creative, artsy person with sort of a perfect image from the outside. But people who know me know that I am not like that, people who don't know me can see me as a nice person, without any problems, without any body issues […]. I would like to see them a more idealized version of myself. I would also like for people to see me as a person who travels a lot, who doesn't have any money problems or any other issues, who is really open-minded and who sees a lot of the world." (P9)

> "I think on Instagram everyone is just showing the best version of themselves, where they look their best […]. I think you just want to create an image and you decide which side of yourself you show. And you're not going to post pictures of yourself crying in the library. I just want to show where I have been and that it was so nice there and that I had a really good time. I just want to show that I was around and that I was travelling." (P5)

A noteworthy aspect of the external view of the participants' identity was their connection to fashion. Many participants indicated that they wished to be perceived as fashionable individuals. In this regard, the fashion brands they followed on Instagram were primarily intended to provide inspiration for the latest trends for the coming season and, if required, to buy products accordingly. No gender difference was found as both groups were interested in fashion and wanted to be up to date. It became apparent that the participants sought inspiration from high-end brands positioned in the premium segment yet did not buy from them due to a lack of necessary means. Instead, they bought similar alternatives from cheaper brands, as suggested by the following quote.

> "And for inspiration. Maybe I see a really nice expensive dress and then I see a cheaper brand like Zara having a similar design and then I get inspired to create new looks." (P5)

Apart from fashion, fitness brands were also followed by the participant, aimed at getting new tips for effective fitness programs as well as being inspired and motivated by the fit people portrayed in the photos.

> "Just to get some ideas about the food and the workouts I can have or the workout menu I can have in the gym. I follow them mostly for inspiration." (P2)

4.2. Self-brand connection

Second key aspect of this study was the connection between the interviewees with certain brands. Most participants found it important that those brands they identified with and followed on Instagram shared their values. In this context, the participants were not primarily concerned with factors such as price, but rather with the brand personality, i.e. the values, visions and what a brand stood for. For instance, one participant considered a brand to be particularly great because it stood for sustainability and waste reduction.

> "A special company that I have in mind is called 'Pi Skincare'. They have organic products and they are sustainable and cruelty-free. It was founded by a woman who also had sensitive skin so I could totally relate to her on a personal level." (P10)

Although for most participants, sharing same values was crucial for identifying with certain brands, they mentioned other reasons as well. Particularly in the field of fashion brands, the participants found it important that the brands corresponded with their personal style. For instance, a couple of participants identified especially with the minimalistic lifestyle and therefore found connection brands that offered the opportunity to express this lifestyle.

> "I think the brands that I mostly follow are more minimalistic. I think what I really like to wear is a bit in between minimalistic clothing slash a bit more […] fancy." (P7)

One brand characteristic was found to be particularly significant among the participants. They all considered authenticity as the most important characteristic for a brand. If authenticity was lacking in a brand, the target group did not identify with the brand and thus did not develop a self-brand connection or brand loyalty. If a brand presented itself as too superficial and tried to maintain a perfect image, this had a negative effect on the participants' opinion of the brand. As participants note:

> "They have to be authentic; I don't like when it is made up too much. When everything is too cool, I don't like it. It has to be authentic and they create an authentic brand through their stories." (P1)

> "The most important thing is authenticity and something that doesn't steal my time, something that adds value to me. And it shouldn't make me feel bad because I try to not be unsatisfied all the time." (P8)

While no consistent pattern could be found in terms of brand following behavior, unfollowing was quite frequent. While some participants stated to quickly follow new brands on Instagram, others argued that they had become more selective with the brands they follow over time. In addition, some participants indicated that they unknowingly followed certain brands, or could no longer recall having followed them, while others argued they needed to be big fans of certain brands in order to actively look for and follow them. Many participants stated that they were very quick to unfollow brands. Several reasons were cited for this, including repetitive content, boredom, excessive posting, excessively using emojis as well as heavy advertising.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings are consistent with the theory of self-concept (Shavelson et al., 1976), relying on an individual's perception of themselves. At the same time, the findings also align with Carter and Grover (2015), who note that individuals assess themselves in relation to others, based on how they experience the reactions of others to them as well as their self-evaluation. Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Goffman's (1959) theory of the performative manifestation of selfhood.

In addition to their personal identity, most participants outlined their second, public identity shown on Instagram. Drawing on Goffman's 'give-off' image, the participants noted that they were performing a role within the virtual world as they sought to portray the best possible version of themselves as well as to polish their image. This points to the performative aspect of identity creation (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013;

Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Individuals, like actors, are aware of the audience prior to performing and thus adapt their role to specific social rules and conventions. Participants agreed that Instagram offered them the opportunity to portray an idealized Self by presenting themselves as an interesting person to the public. Thus, the existence of private and public identities described by Markos et al. (2018) could be inferred by the results. Participants believed only certain aspects of their lives were voluntarily and willingly shared with others on Instagram. These include, for example, travel experiences, restaurant visits, photos with friends, or flawless selfies. Conversely, participants felt that private issues such as political attitudes, money problems or a lack of self-confidence should be kept private. This interpretation becomes apparent on the personal Instagram feed of the individuals, as they have absolute control over it, and use it as a canvas in order to paint a perfect image of themselves.

The brand following behavior, according to the findings, conveys the identity of participants on a more personal level. Therefore, while brands influenced their personal identity, they were not used with the intent of optimally representing their Self to the outer world. The findings support the observation from Escalas & Bettman (2005) that the relationship between a brand and the consumer mirrors the individual's identity. The personal interests of the participants were reflected by the brands they followed on Instagram. For example, participant 2 showed an interest in fashion, sport, and music. Based on these interests, the participant followed brands that were operating in these industries, such as Calvin Klein, Reebok, and Fender. Individuals favor brands that reflect values and personality traits consistent with their self-image (Kressmann et al, 2006). This is consistent with Chernev et al. (2011), who observe that an individual's motivation to express their inner Self is fueled by a desire to demonstrate their self-identity to themselves rather than to others. This self-indication is intended to increase people's perception regarding the type of person they are.

At the same time, some prestige brands are being followed by the participants due to the aspiration of belonging to a certain social group in the future. It may be concluded that individuals are driven by a self-improvement motive in order to express their ideal Self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). As Berger and Heath (2007) suggest, brands are used to demonstrate that individuals belong to a particular social group as well as to indicate that one desires to be a member of such group. Thus, the representation of millennials' ideal Self is not achieved only through active brand buying but also through following certain brands on Instagram (Correa et al., 2010).

6. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

From the study, it may be concluded that while the millennials are aware of their private identity, they are also conscious towards the presentation of their ideal public identity. They also express their personal identity through brand preference. They attached great importance on the ideals of brands which correspond to their own values. Furthermore, both the information and the inspiration element were of great importance. Whilst a self-brand connection was observed among millennials who were able to identify with brands that matched their personal interests, neither brand attachment nor brand loyalty could be detected. Participants stated that although they quickly followed Instagram, they also quickly followed the brand if they found it annoying.

As millennials do not display a particularly high brand loyalty on Instagram, tending to follow and unfollow brands quickly, businesses must be able to present themselves in an engaging manner. However, this does not depend on perfect product photos or advertising measures, which seem to repel the target group. Rather, brands should concentrate on communicating their corporate values and culture to the outside world in a comprehensible way by sharing it with their customers. Varied, interesting, informative and inspiring content on Instagram is essential for a successful appearance. Obvious product photos should be avoided. Companies should give a glimpse behind the scenes, share private insights and largely avoid advertising on this platform. Visual language should predominate, as users interact primarily with images rather than with the text.

Present research contains some limitations and therefore the results should be considered with some caution. Firstly, due to the exploratory nature of the study, the sample was limited to ten participants. Secondly, the sample of participants was limited to mainly European citizens representing the millennial generation. A further study could extend the coverage to other continents, such as Asia, Africa or Australia for higher generalizability. In addition, other age groups could be included in the study for comparison across customer segments.

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APPENDIX 1– LIST OF GENERALLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Guiding research questions used to understand the actual Self-concept
    i. How would you describe yourself?
    ii. How do you present yourself on Instagram?
2. Guiding research questions used to understand the ideal Self-concept in connection with brand usage.
    i. What brands to you particularly like? Do you follow them on Instagram?
    ii. Why do you like those brands? What factors make them appealing to you?
    iii. What do you like in particular about the brands Instagram Account/interaction?
    iv. Do you merely follow those brands, or do you actively buy them? How often do you purchase it? If not, why not?

APPENDIX 2– CODES WITH REPRESENTATIVE QUOTATIONS

CODE	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTATION 1	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTATION 2	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTATION 3
Self-image	I think I am really open-minded and like I just said I have a really positive attitude towards other people, and I think that I am a good listener, that I actually care about people. (P1)	I think I am a people person; I like to be social; I like good quality things; I enjoy my life. I would consider myself to be a social person. (P2)	I would describe myself as a curious person, outgoing, a person who likes to explore new things and see new things, experience new things. (P4)
Give-off image	I really like to be something special. I like to dress up and I really like to be well dressed that is why I follow Ralph Lauren on Instagram. I would like to be seen as a nice, friendly, sportive, cool guy. Always well dressed. (P3)	I would like for people to see me as creative, artsy person with sort of a perfect image from the outside. But people who know me know that I am not like that, people who don't know me they can see me as nice person, without any problems, without any body issues and stuff like that. I would like to see them a more idealized version of myself. (P5)	I mean what I love that people see in me that they feel happy and nice around me and I would like that people are happy when they see me and that they know that they will have a good time with me. This is really important for me. And I do like fashion and I do like to dress nicely, it is important to me. (P9)
Inspiration	I started working out two years ago and I just wanted to know like what to do what I should do when I am in the gym and what I should eat, because I am new to this field. (P2)	Seeing her [Michelle Obama] on my Instagram page is a cool reminder just to remember to love yourself today. She is a positive presence on my feed. (P6)	I mostly look at it, sometimes I like their posts, but I mainly use Instagram to get some inspiration for my clothing because for me it's what I do with those brands on Instagram is. (P7)
Information	I follow them because I want to get new information and I easily unfollow the brand. Brands are the part on Instagram which I unfollow a lot. (P2)	Basically, they teach, show you and give you inspiration of how you can dress. How their fashion is and how you can wear their fashion. (P7)	For sure. I think since I started to use Instagram, I literally don't use any other website anymore to find out about things. (P9)
Brand authenticity	I just try to look for brands who are more lowkey and cooler who are not made up or superficial. (P1)	I want them to show a bit more of their personality in their posts and videos, that makes it more interesting to see their live and makes them more believable. (P2)	The most important thing is authenticity and something that doesn't steal my time, something that adds value to me. And it shouldn't make me feel bad because I try to not be unsatisfied all the time. (P8)
Following behavior	I am a quick follower of brands. If I like something, if I see they post frequently and if I see that their feed is interesting to me and not always the same then I would follow the brand. (P5)	When I get introduced to a new company, I always check out their Instagram profile to see the general feel of the company and I really liked this particular feel of the company. (P6)	It is not only about the clothes but also about the location and the feeling you get from a picture. Normally I get to know a brand and then I follow the brand when I like it because I like to see their pictures. And not the other way around. (P10)

Unfollowing behavior	When they are using too many emojis. And when they become too commercial. (P1)	As soon as there are too many postings or there are not interesting anymore then I unfollow them. (P5)	I don't unfollow brands quickly. The only thing I unfollow is when I see something that doesn't make sense at all otherwise I kind of ignore it. (P8)
Connection to brands	I like for example FrankandOak which is only based in Canada, ThatBoi is only based in Munich, those tiny brands I prefer compared to COS, which is one of the few brands I follow that is actually big. (P6)	I really like to follow skincare companies. A special company that I have in mind is called "Pi Skincare. (P7)	I would say Reformation, because they have an eye on sustainability, so they reduce waste, save water and do not use chemicals for coloring their clothes. (P10)
Purchasing behavior	I am a smart shopper, I buy on the Internet, especially on Amazon. And when I like things, I buy them because I can afford it. I like mostly Amazon. (P3)	For the more well-being or skincare brands I actually buy those regularly. (P8)	Yes, I actually bought one from Ratandboa. I saw it on a blogger who was wearing the brand and I liked it. So, I started following them and I bought a dress. (P9)
Brand loyalty	I am really sticking to them and follow them for a long time. (P1)	Definitely, I am not brand loyal. That's why I am super picky in following brands. Because I just follow what I like and buy. (P3)	For three or four years I continuously buy Vans. (P7)
Instagram Feed	For me it is really important that they have a consistent tone either image wise or the way of captions. They have to make me feel like 'Oh this is interesting; I want to see more of that.' That will attract me to follow this brand. (P2)	I like when they show the brand ambassadors, who are mostly celebrities and I like to see how they interact with the brand and how they interact with their followers. It must be entertaining, I like videos, it shouldn't be boring, because I do get easily bored. (P3)	I mean when its clean, minimalistic when it has a cool and clean style. Most of the time it's not about the colors, I like it really clean, white, grey or black and a tiny bit of color. (P9)
Group belonging	Definitely to the upper class, you know. I want to show that I am successful, have a good job, can afford things and that I basically can buy whatever I want. (P3)	I would definitely say so, yes. Also, because I changed my location several times, so it used to be that I was in a certain location like Munich and I was different. (P8)	Some of the accounts I follow could be in a certain kind of social group you know. (P9)

Table 2 – Codes with Representative Quotations