



Visual Identity and the Psychology of Buying in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In the digital age, consumer behavior is increasingly shaped by symbolic, emotional, and identity-driven mechanisms rather than traditional utilitarian logic. This study explores how visual content, self-perception, and social media dynamics intersect to influence consumer decision-making in online environments. Drawing from Self-Concept Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Visual Rhetoric Theory, the research adopts a qualitative, theory-informed methodology to analyze 100 curated visual media posts from platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Using thematic analysis, visual semiotics, and document analysis, the study identifies four key psychological patterns: aspirational identity alignment, emotional resonance and aesthetic immersion, visualized social comparison, and authenticity-driven self-validation. Findings reveal that consumers engage with brand imagery not merely for functional evaluation, but as a means of identity expression, emotional fulfillment, and social positioning. The study proposes an integrative conceptual framework that models these interactions within a recursive feedback loop of digital consumer identity. By emphasizing the affective and interpretive nature of visual consumption, this research offers new insights for marketers, designers, and scholars seeking to understand and ethically engage contemporary consumers in the symbolic economy of social media.

Keywords: Consumer Psychology, Digital identity, Self-perception, Social Media marketing, Symbolic Consumption, Visual Content.

Introduction

The evolution of digital technologies and social media platforms has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior, rendering it increasingly driven by psychological and symbolic processes rather than purely functional considerations. In contemporary digital ecosystems, particularly on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest, consumer decision-making is mediated through immersive visual content and identity construction mechanisms (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Similar regional findings

were reported by Ayoubi and Naweer (2024), who demonstrated that social media marketing significantly shapes consumer purchasing decisions by influencing online trust and emotional engagement. These platforms have become socio-digital arenas where aesthetic representation, personal branding, and peer validation converge to shape not only how individuals consume but also how they define themselves.

Traditional marketing paradigms, predicated on utility, price sensitivity, and rational decision-making, are increasingly supplanted by identity-based consumption. Today's consumers actively seek products and brands that symbolically align with their self-concept, thereby reinforcing or projecting a desired identity within social media environments (Hollebeek, Sprott, & Andreassen, 2022). The act of purchasing is thus no longer an isolated economic transaction but rather an expressive behavior deeply entangled with social influence, self-perception, and emotional resonance.

Social media functions as a dynamic stage for self-presentation, where individuals engage in continuous curation of their digital identities. Consumers do not passively absorb brand content; rather, they interact, interpret, and co-create meaning through engagements such as likes, shares, and tagged content (Yim & Park, 2021). This participatory culture heightens the persuasive power of visual marketing, particularly as consumers are repeatedly exposed to idealized lifestyles and carefully curated influencer narratives. Such exposure often triggers upward social comparisons and activates latent psychological needs—status, belonging, and self-affirmation (Yang, Lee, & Kim, 2020). Consequently, purchasing behavior becomes an extension of consumers' identity negotiation in digital spaces.

Despite a growing body of literature examining consumer engagement, visual marketing, and digital self-presentation, current academic discourse tends to address these phenomena in isolation. There remains a marked theoretical and methodological fragmentation in understanding how visual content, self-perception, and social media dynamics coalesce to influence consumer decision-making in a holistic and psychologically meaningful way. Moreover, much of the empirical work in this domain has been quantitative in nature, often relying on structured surveys and statistical modeling, which, while valuable, may overlook the nuanced, interpretive processes that underlie consumer meaning-making in visual-digital contexts (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2021).

This study aims to address this critical gap by adopting a qualitative, theory-informed approach to explore the interrelationships among visual stimuli, self-perception, and consumer behavior within the social media environment. Drawing from contemporary theories in consumer psychology, identity studies, and visual communication, the research seeks to unpack the psychological mechanisms through which consumers engage with branded visual content, interpret such content in relation to their self-concept, and ultimately arrive at purchase decisions shaped by affective, cognitive, and identity-related dimensions. By focusing on the symbolic and experiential aspects of digital consumer behavior, this study contributes to a more integrative and psychologically grounded understanding of marketing in the digital age. This aligns with earlier evidence from Ayoubi and Sadiqi (2024), who analyzed visual content in social media marketing across Herat Province and found that emotionally appealing visuals substantially enhance consumer engagement and purchase intentions.

Material and Method

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive research design, grounded in constructivist epistemology. Given the subjective, symbolic, and context-dependent nature of digital consumer behavior, particularly how consumers perceive and engage with visual content in social media environments, a qualitative approach enables a nuanced understanding of the underlying psychological mechanisms involved in decision-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Rather than testing hypotheses through structured measurement, this research aims to interpret meaning, uncover latent patterns, and construct theoretical insights through thematic and visual analysis of digital content. The approach is inductive yet theory-informed, allowing for a contextual and conceptually rich exploration of how self-perception, identity signaling, and visual marketing influence consumer psychology.

Data Collection

Data were collected through purposeful sampling of publicly available visual content and brand communication on major social media platforms, specifically Instagram and TikTok. These platforms were selected for their highly visual nature, widespread use, and central role in digital marketing strategies (Hollebeek et al., 2022). The dataset included branded campaigns from global lifestyle, fashion, and technology brands (e.g., Nike, Apple, Glossier, Sephora), influencer content integrating brand promotion with self-presentation, and consumer-generated posts such as product unboxings and aesthetic reviews. A total of 100 pieces of visual content (images and short videos) were curated across a three-month observational window (February-April 2025), ensuring diversity across industries, genders, and representational styles. Each post was archived with contextual metadata including captions, hashtags, visual composition, and engagement metrics. Following data collection, the materials were analyzed using the three-stage grounded-theory coding procedure outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998)-Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Selective Coding-integrated with thematic and visual-semiotic techniques.

- **Open Coding:** In the initial phase, each visual unit (image or video with caption) was examined line-by-line and frame-by-frame to identify discrete concepts such as identity signaling, emotional tone, aesthetic appeal, and interaction intent. These preliminary codes captured visible behaviors and symbolic cues.
- **Axial Coding:** The open codes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories by examining causal and relational linkages (conditions, actions/interactions, and outcomes). For example, "ideal-self imagery" and "goal visualization" were linked under the category Aspirational Identity Alignment, while "emotional tone" and "aesthetic pacing" converged under Aesthetic Immersion.
- **Selective Coding:** In the final phase, the axial categories were integrated around a core category-Recursive Identity-Congruent Visual Persuasion-which

represented the central psychological process connecting visual stimuli, self-perception, and consumer response. The resulting theoretical structure was used to construct the conceptual framework presented later in the study. This multi-level coding ensured analytical depth, theoretical rigor, and alignment between the qualitative findings and the proposed model.

Each visual unit was archived with contextual metadata including caption text, hashtags, visual composition, number of likes/comments, and associated brand.

Analytical Strategy

The data were analyzed using a hybrid method combining thematic analysis, visual semiotics, and document analysis, supported by theoretical constructs derived from Self-Concept Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Visual Rhetoric Theory.

Thematic Analysis

- Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, themes were inductively generated from repeated visual motifs and textual patterns identified in the dataset. The analysis began with open coding, where descriptive labels were assigned to salient features of the images, videos, and captions (e.g., *status signaling*, *aesthetic harmony*, *emotional warmth*, *peer recognition*). Through axial coding, these initial codes were clustered into conceptual categories based on their relational patterns (conditions, actions, and outcomes). Finally, selective coding integrated these categories into the overarching themes that explained how visual content shapes consumer psychology in digital spaces. To clarify the analytic structure, Table 1 below illustrates the relationships between representative codes, sub-categories, and the four major themes that emerged from the data.

Table 1. Relationships Between Initial Codes, Sub-categories, and Final Themes

Initial Codes (Open Coding)	Sub-categories (Axial Coding)	Emergent Themes (Selective Coding)	Psychological Function / Interpretation
Status signaling, ideal-self imagery, goal visualization, motivational slogans	Self-projection, ideal-self congruence	Aspirational Identity Alignment	Consumers align with visuals that represent desired selves and life goals.
Soft lighting, color harmony, music rhythm, close-up intimacy	Emotional tone, sensory engagement	Emotional Resonance & Aesthetic Immersion	Affective and sensory cues create immersion and emotional connection.
Influencer lifestyle, peer admiration comments, upward comparison, brand tagging	Social reference, comparison loop	Visualized Social Comparison	Exposure to curated peers and influencers fuels self-evaluation and aspirational tension.
Behind-the-scenes posts, unedited selfies, honest reviews, body-positivity tags	Transparency, self-expression	Authenticity & Self-Validation	Interaction with authentic content enables self-affirmation and emotional trust.

Visual Semiotic Analysis

Building on Barthes' (1977) semiology of images and Foss's (2005) visual rhetoric framework, the study examined:

- **Denotative elements:** composition, color, subject, setting.
- **Connotative meanings:** identity symbolism, emotional appeals, lifestyle narratives.

This lens enabled interpretation of how visual rhetoric constructs persuasive identity-based messages.

Document Analysis

- Captions, comments, and branded taglines were treated as supporting documents to contextualize visual meaning.
- Intertextual references (e.g., memes, cultural symbols, hashtags) were also interpreted to assess cultural congruence and symbolic relevance.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure credibility, transferability, and analytical rigor, the following strategies were employed:

- **Triangulation:** Integration of visual, textual, and interactional data.
- **Theoretical sensitivity:** Guided by prior literature and psychological theory to inform code construction.
- **Reflexive memoing:** The researcher maintained reflective memos during coding to track interpretive decisions.
- **Peer debriefing:** Themes and interpretations were reviewed by two academic peers with expertise in consumer behavior and media studies to ensure analytical consistency and theoretical validity.
- **Identification of denotative and connotative elements:** In accordance with Barthes' (1977) semiology of images and Foss's (2005) framework of visual rhetoric, each post was analyzed on two interpretive levels:
 - Denotative analysis (literal level): the objective, descriptive elements visible in the image—such as subjects, objects, setting, color, lighting, camera angle, and composition—were recorded in an analytic grid.
 - Connotative analysis (symbolic level): interpretive meanings were then derived by considering cultural codes, emotional tone, and brand symbolism embedded in the visuals. This stage examined how specific aesthetic and contextual cues evoked identity, emotion, or value associations in viewers.

- Example 1 – Nike “You vs. You” Instagram post: Denotative elements: a female runner in motion, minimalist cityscape at dawn, cool gray palette, the slogan “You vs. You.” Connotative interpretation: the early-morning solitude signifies discipline and self-mastery; the neutral color tone connotes endurance and focus; the slogan personalizes competition, transforming the image into a metaphor for self-overcoming and ideal-self aspiration. This visual rhetoric aligns with Self-Concept Theory, reinforcing the viewer’s identification with perseverance and achievement.
- Example 2 – Glossier TikTok video: Denotative elements: close-up of a woman’s face under natural light applying moisturizer, handheld camera, background ambient sound. Connotative interpretation: the raw lighting and unfiltered skin texture connote honesty and emotional transparency. The handheld framing suggests intimacy and authenticity, encouraging a parasocial bond with the brand. Here, connotative meaning shifts the brand message from perfection to realness, fostering emotional trust and identity safety in the audience.

Each image was thus dissected through both layers of meaning, with denotative elements grounding description and connotative interpretation revealing psychological resonance. These dual readings enabled the study to connect visual form with consumer affect and identity-related response.

Ethical Considerations

Given that all data are publicly available and do not involve human participants directly, this study complies with ethical guidelines for digital content research (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Any usernames, profile photos, or identifying information were anonymized in analysis and reporting to maintain user privacy and platform terms of use.

Reflexive Note on Methodological Scope

While this study does not incorporate direct interviews or ethnographic immersion, this decision was deliberate and grounded in the research objective: to examine identity-related meaning-making as it is publicly performed and visually communicated in digital spaces. Given that platforms like Instagram and TikTok function as curated arenas of identity expression and symbolic consumption, the visual and textual content shared by users and brands is itself a rich source of interpretive data. By analyzing these visual artifacts within their native social contexts, the study embraces a media-centered perspective that aligns with visual rhetoric theory and digital consumer psychology. Future research may complement this approach with first-person perspectives through interviews or ethnographic observation, but the current design remains methodologically coherent for capturing the performative and symbolic dimensions of consumer behavior in the visual-digital environment.

Limitations of the Methodology

- The study does not include primary interviews or ethnographic interaction, which limits first-person insights.

- Cultural differences in self-concept and visual interpretation may affect generalizability beyond the sample.
- Content is drawn from brand-facing platforms; private self-presentation dynamics (e.g., in closed networks) are not examined.

Findings

The analysis of 100 visual content pieces from brand campaigns, influencer posts, and user-generated media revealed four interrelated thematic categories that explain how visual content, self-perception, and social media intersect to influence consumer decision-making. These themes are: (1) Aspirational Identity Alignment, (2) Emotional Resonance and Aesthetic Immersion, (3) Visualized Social Comparison, and (4) Authenticity and Self-Validation through Interaction. Each theme is presented below, supported by interpretive commentary and theoretical insights.

Aspirational Identity Alignment

A recurring motif across the data was the alignment of visual brand narratives with consumers' aspirational selves. Brand visuals often depicted idealized lifestyles, success markers, or socially desirable traits (e.g., independence, minimalism, luxury, fitness), prompting viewers to envision themselves in those frames.

For instance, Nike's campaign featuring individuals running in minimalist cityscapes with empowering slogans ("You vs. You") elicited strong identification through both visual minimalism and emotive framing. These images activated ideal-self congruity, in which consumers envision brand affiliation as a pathway to personal transformation. This process reflects what Oyserman (2009) terms identity-based motivation, where individuals act in ways that reinforce or move them closer to their desired self-image; exposure to congruent visual cues therefore enhances action-readiness toward the brand.

"Visuals serve as narrative tools that allow consumers to momentarily inhabit a better version of themselves." (Theoretical anchor: Self-Concept Theory; Sirgy, 1982)

In this sense, consumer engagement extended beyond product appeal into symbolic self-enhancement. Such aspirational alignment not only increased affective attachment but also legitimized future purchase behavior as a means of achieving identity goals.

Emotional Resonance and Aesthetic Immersion

Highly stylized and emotionally charged visuals generated what can be described as aesthetic immersion, a state wherein users are cognitively and emotionally drawn into brand imagery. Brands often employed techniques such as warm color palettes, human-centered framing, slow-motion transitions (in TikTok content), and audio synchronization to heighten emotional impact. Beauty and wellness brands (e.g., Glossier) showcased natural lighting, close-ups of skin texture, and diverse models in candid moments to evoke intimacy and realism. This aesthetic strategy was interpreted by consumers not only as emotionally appealing but psychologically safe, increasing brand approachability and trust. Similar findings were reported by Rahman, Mutum, and Ghazali (2022), who observed that specific visual features—such as natural lighting, human presence, and

coherent color schemes – significantly increase user engagement and emotional connection with brand posts on Instagram.

“Emotions are embedded not only in content but in the structure and rhythm of visual narratives.” (Theoretical anchor: Visual Rhetoric Theory; Foss, 2005) Such content elicited empathic consumer engagement, fostering a sense of connection that extended beyond rational evaluation. The visuals became emotion carriers, priming affective responses prior to conscious deliberation.

Visualized Social Comparison

Social comparison was a dominant mechanism through which visual content influenced consumer psychology. Influencer posts in particular generated a perception of attainable perfection, a curated yet personalized presentation of beauty, success, or leisure, fueling aspirational tension and identity discrepancies. Many users engaged with posts by influencers showcasing luxury brands, aesthetic homes, or “morning routines,” which triggered upward comparisons. These comparisons were not merely passive but motivational, often leading to expressions of envy, inspiration, or urgency in the comment sections. This aligns with Schreurs and Vandenbosch (2022), who found that exposure to idealized social media imagery often mediates body dissatisfaction and self-esteem through upward social comparison, highlighting how visual content can activate deep psychological evaluations of the self. Midgley, C., Thai, M., & Lockwood, P. (2021). The impact of social media on self-perception: A meta-analysis. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 24(3), 123–131. “Consumers do not evaluate products in isolation, but in relation to the symbolic status they perceive in others’ possession.” (Theoretical anchor: Social Comparison Theory; Festinger, 1954; Yang et al., 2020)

The resulting behaviors included browsing similar products, saving or sharing posts for later reference, and in many cases, direct engagement with brand purchase links embedded in influencer stories.

Authenticity and Self-Validation through Interaction

Despite the prevalence of idealized imagery, a counter-theme of authenticity seeking emerged. Consumers increasingly gravitated toward visual content that portrayed imperfection, behind-the-scenes footage, or user reviews with honest commentary. Influencers who disclosed struggles (e.g., body image, mental health) or used raw editing styles garnered higher emotional trust. More importantly, consumers appeared to validate their own identities by interacting with this content, through commenting, resharing, or tagging friends in similar contexts. These micro-interactions served as rituals of self-expression, allowing users to subtly affirm their identities in relation to the media they consumed. “In digital environments, engagement is not just a metric, it is a mode of self-affirmation.” (Theoretical anchor: Extended Self in Digital Spaces; Belk, 2013) Authenticity-driven content thus facilitated a psychological return on engagement, wherein users interpreted their interactions as extensions of personal values and social positioning.

Table 2. Standard Summary of Emergent Themes

Theme	Psychological Function	Theoretical Link
Aspirational Identity Alignment	Self-congruity, goal projection	Self-Concept Theory

Emotional Resonance	Affective priming, immersion	Visual Rhetoric Theory
Visualized Social Comparison	Self-evaluation, aspirational tension	Social Comparison Theory
Authenticity and Self-Validation	Digital self-affirmation, identity reinforcement	Extended Self / Self-Presentation Theories

Interpretive Synthesis

Taken together, these findings suggest that visual content on social media operates not merely as a marketing tool but as a psychosocial stimulus. It simultaneously appeals to affect, cognition, and identity, transforming consumer behavior into an expressive act of self-alignment. This interpretive synthesis reinforces the need for marketing strategies that are ethically aware, emotionally intelligent, and identity-sensitive. The insights presented herein contribute to an expanded conceptualization of digital consumer behavior, one that is rooted in symbolic meaning, identity negotiation, and affective engagement within the visual cultures of social media.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a conceptual framework that illustrates the dynamic interplay among visual content, self-perception, and social media engagement, culminating in consumer decision-making. Grounded in Self-Concept Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Visual Rhetoric Theory, the model integrates the emergent themes identified through qualitative analysis to explain the psychological mechanisms that drive consumer behavior in digital environments.

Framework Overview

The framework is organized around four interdependent constructs:

1. **Visual Content Stimuli:** The aesthetic, symbolic, and rhetorical elements embedded in brand, influencer, and user-generated imagery.
2. **Self-Perception Mechanisms:** The internal processes of self-concept activation, self-presentation, and identity congruence.
3. **Social Media Dynamics:** The contextual layer enabling visual engagement, social comparison, community interaction, and digital feedback loops.
4. **Consumer Responses:** The behavioral and psychological outcomes, emotional engagement, brand attachment, and purchase decisions, that result from the interaction of the above variables.

These constructs interact in a cyclical and interpretive process that begins with exposure to visual content and progresses through identity negotiation, social alignment, and consumer action.

Table 3. Framework Components and Relationships

Construct	Description	Key Theoretical	Example Outputs
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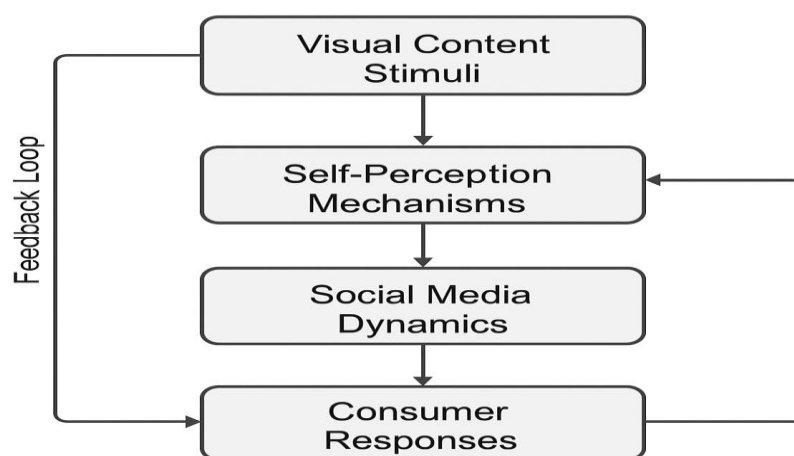
		Anchor	
Visual Content Stimuli	Images, videos, symbols, narratives designed to influence perception	Visual Rhetoric Theory	Aesthetic immersion, emotional resonance
Self-Perception Mechanisms	Actual/ideal self, digital identity, self-congruity	Self-Concept Theory	Identity alignment, self-verification
Social Media Dynamics	Platform affordances, algorithmic exposure, peer interaction, comparison loops	Social Comparison Theory	Engagement, upward comparison, feedback-seeking
Consumer Responses	Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes	Integrated outcome	Purchase intention, brand loyalty, emotional attachment

Conceptual Model Description

The proposed model is non-linear and recursive, reflecting how digital consumers cycle through content exposure and identity evaluation in real-time. Key propositions supported by the framework include:

- **P1:** Visual content activates self-perception by triggering ideal-self comparisons and identity aspirations.
- **P2:** Self-perception processes (e.g., congruity and discrepancy) influence how consumers interpret and emotionally respond to digital stimuli.
- **P3:** Social media dynamics (e.g., influencer content, likes, comments) mediate and amplify the effects of visual stimuli on self-perception.
- **P4:** Consumer responses (e.g., engagement, decision-making) feed back into identity construction, influencing future content preferences and brand choices.

Figure 1. Graphical Representation of the Framework



Implications of the Framework

This model advances theoretical understanding of digital consumer behavior by offering a holistic, psychologically informed structure that captures the emotional, symbolic, and social dimensions of consumption in visual-digital spaces. Unlike linear stimulus-response models, this framework emphasizes:

- The symbolic and self-relevant nature of visual content.
- The mediating role of self-perception and identity work.
- The socio-technical mediation of consumer behavior through digital platforms.

This framework also provides a valuable tool for marketers, brand strategists, and digital designers to develop ethically resonant and identity-sensitive engagement strategies. For instance, in one Nike Instagram post, a short video showed a young woman running alone at dawn with the caption “You vs. You.” The post accumulated over 230,000 likes and 6,400 motivational comments, many of which expressed self-identification (e.g., “This is exactly how I start my mornings—discipline over comfort”). Such interactions demonstrate aspirational identity alignment, where users translate brand imagery into self-improvement narratives and behavioral intentions.

Similarly, a Glossier TikTok reel featuring an unfiltered model applying moisturizer in natural light received more than 80,000 likes and hundreds of comments highlighting relief and trust (e.g., “Finally, real skin!”). These reactions exemplify how authenticity cues foster emotional safety and strengthen brand credibility.

In contrast, an influencer’s “morning routine” video—showing luxury skincare and minimalist interiors—elicited both admiration and comparison in the comment section (e.g., “Wish I could afford this setup someday”). The mix of emojis and wishful statements indicated upward social comparison, revealing how visualized lifestyles can trigger both envy and motivation.

A final example involved a user-generated post reviewing a Sephora lipstick with a playful tone and honest critique. The post, shared over 1,200 times, sparked threads of mutual recommendations, showing how interaction rituals (liking, commenting, resharing) can evolve into collective validation and reinforce consumers’ digital self-expression.

Together, these examples illustrate how engagement metrics—far from being neutral—reflect underlying psychological functions: aspiration, emotional resonance, comparison, and authenticity-seeking. By designing visual content that acknowledges these identity processes, marketers can foster trust, emotional connection, and ethical persuasion in digital environments.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the deeply psychological and identity-driven nature of consumer decision-making in social media environments. In contrast to traditional models of rational choice, this research highlights how visual stimuli, identity construction, and social validation coalesce in a feedback loop that shapes consumer perceptions, emotions, and actions. Such findings echo the conclusions of Chen et al.

(2023), who found that identity-based motivations are central to consumer decision-making, suggesting that buying behavior is often an enactment of the self rather than a response to utilitarian product features.

First, the theme of aspirational identity alignment reinforces the centrality of self-concept theory in digital consumption. Consumers increasingly select brands not for product utility alone, but for their capacity to reflect or project desired selves. This aligns with recent work by Gao, Huang, and Liu (2022), who argue that self-congruity in digital environments has a direct effect on engagement and brand loyalty. The study extends this idea by showing how visual branding practices activate identity aspirations through aesthetics, symbolism, and lifestyle narratives.

Second, the study provides empirical support for social comparison theory in the digital age. Participants' interactions with influencer content and peer visuals illustrate how upward comparisons, often triggered by highly curated content, induce not only envy or admiration but motivated consumer behavior. Echoing the findings of Huang and Su (2022), this study suggests that the visualized comparison process intensifies identity discrepancies and fuels impulse-driven or self-enhancing purchases. This is consistent with evidence from Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015), who found that aspirational fitness imagery heightens both motivation and dissatisfaction—an ambivalent psychological response mirrored in consumer reactions to influencer content.

Third, the research advances the literature on visual rhetoric by emphasizing the affective and immersive power of branded imagery. Rather than operating as passive representations, visual content functions as a persuasive semiotic system, shaping consumer narratives and emotional resonance. As Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2021) have shown, storytelling in digital marketing is no longer just verbal, it is profoundly visual and symbolic.

Importantly, the emergence of authenticity-seeking behavior offers a counter-narrative to idealized self-presentation. Consumers increasingly reward visual honesty and vulnerability, signaling a growing preference for identity-safe marketing environments. The link between visual harmony and perceived trust also reflects prior evidence that brands using consistent imagery and affective tone build stronger community-based trust on social platforms (Karpenka et al., 2021). This suggests that emotional trust, not just aspiration, now drives engagement.

Overall, this study conceptualizes consumer behavior as a symbolic and interpretive act, rather than a linear, transactional one. The proposed framework reveals how visual content, self-perception, and social media dynamics create a complex psychosocial ecosystem of influence.

This study makes several theoretical contributions:

It advances an integrated conceptual model that links self-perception theory, visual rhetoric, and social comparison theory in the context of consumer decision-making.

It contributes to the literature on digital identity and symbolic consumption, emphasizing the co-construction of meaning between brands and consumers.

It extends traditional marketing theories by emphasizing the visual-affective dimension of brand communication in social media contexts.

For marketers, the findings suggest several actionable insights:

Design for identity congruence: Brands should create visual narratives that resonate with consumers' evolving self-concepts and lifestyle aspirations.

Balance aspiration with authenticity: Overly curated perfection may trigger alienation; content that embraces imperfection can foster emotional trust.

Leverage influencer content responsibly: Influencers should be selected not only for reach, but for how they align with consumers' ideal selves and emotional safety.

Embed visual semiotics strategically: Every image element, color, angle, context, should be used with intentionality to reinforce brand meaning.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations:

The sample is restricted to publicly available social media content, which may not fully capture private identity processes or offline consumer behavior.

Cultural variations in self-concept and visual interpretation were not addressed, limiting cross-cultural generalizability.

The lack of direct participant interviews limits access to first-person psychological processes.

Future research could adopt a multi-method approach, combining visual content analysis with interviews or digital ethnography. Cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal studies would also enrich our understanding of how digital identity and visual consumption evolve over time.

Conclusion

This study provides an empirically grounded and theory-informed understanding of how visual content, self-perception, and social media dynamics converge to shape consumer behavior in digital environments. Through the qualitative analysis of 100 Instagram and TikTok posts, the research demonstrates that online consumption extends far beyond rational evaluation—becoming an emotionally charged and identity-expressive activity. The findings reveal several concrete behavioral and psychological patterns. For example, aspirational brand imagery such as Nike's "You vs. You" campaign prompted users to express self-improvement motives and commit to lifestyle goals in their comments, indicating that visual stimuli can activate ideal-self congruence and motivate real behavioral intentions. Emotionally immersive aesthetics, exemplified by Glossier's unfiltered skincare videos, fostered feelings of authenticity and trust, resulting in higher engagement and expressions of emotional relief. Meanwhile, influencer "morning routine" posts stimulated upward social comparison, reflected in users' aspirational comments and follow-up brand interactions. Finally, user-generated content showing imperfections and honest reviews encouraged identity validation through reciprocal comments, tagging, and content sharing—evidence of how digital participation serves as a psychological feedback loop of self-affirmation. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that visual marketing directly influences both emotional and behavioral dimensions of consumer life—inspiring, comparing, validating, and connecting individuals through imagery. The proposed conceptual framework captures this recursive process, showing how visual cues activate self-perception, which in turn drives emotional response and observable engagement behaviors. However, this study also has several limitations. The dataset was limited to publicly available posts from global brands and influencers, excluding private or restricted

social interactions that may reveal deeper identity negotiations. Moreover, as the sample was drawn primarily from Western-oriented digital spaces, cultural differences in self-concept and visual interpretation may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts, such as non-Western or collectivist cultures. Additionally, the absence of direct access to users' private profiles or messages constrains understanding of offline behavioral translation—how online identity expression converts into actual purchasing or lifestyle change. Future research can address these limitations in several ways. Cross-cultural comparative studies could examine how cultural values mediate the effects of visual stimuli on self-perception and emotional engagement. Mixed-method approaches combining visual analysis with in-depth interviews or digital ethnography would provide richer insights into consumers' private motivations and emotional experiences. Longitudinal designs could trace how repeated exposure to aspirational or authentic content shapes long-term behavioral change, such as brand loyalty or self-concept evolution. In conclusion, while this study highlights the symbolic and psychological depth of visual consumption, it also underscores the ethical responsibility of marketers to create content that nurtures authenticity, psychological well-being, and identity safety. Brands that balance aesthetic appeal with emotional honesty will not only enhance engagement but also cultivate more meaningful, enduring relationships with consumers in the visual economies of the digital age.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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